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The Transformation of Learner Identity: Exploring the Transition of Chinese Master's Students into a Scottish University

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PhD study is not an easy journey, with a lot of stress both financially and psychologically, but fortunately my family, friends and my supervisors were always there for me to ease the pain, so that I had the courage and strength to walk to the end. Because of them, there were more pleasant moments in this long-term term study than misery and loneliness. And because of them, what I have gained during my PhD study is significantly more than this thesis.

Abstract

This thesis is based on an in-depth study designed to understand a group of Chinese master's students' transition experience into a Scottish university that emphasises cultivating independent and reflective learners. The research involved a longitudinal study to follow up 19 Chinese masters' students from education, science and engineering programmes for a whole academic year (2016/7) with three individual interviews per participant. The interviews explored students' individual and collective transition experiences, and how they perceived and coped with the transitions in different stages of their studies. The study also placed focus on whether and how the experiences affected their learner identities and capacities for learner autonomy.

Narrative inquiry and thematic analysis were used in this study. The data is presented within four main topics: how students responded to the UK teaching, learning and assessment methods, how students interacted with their teachers, how they collaborated with peers, and to explain why Chinese students appear to be "silent" and "passive" in learning. Moreover, in order to give deeper insights of the individual transition experience, three case studies are also presented to tell three dramatic stories of three individual participants' transitions. The research findings challenge previous studies which present Chinese students as a homogenous group, who would have the same challenges making the transition and who would need the same support. This study provides evidence that Chinese students with different background and previous learning experiences have very different transition experiences and have diverse responses to the learning environment. Furthermore, not every student reported that the pedagogies and assessment methods were so obviously different from their studies in China and some of them did not feel it was necessary to adjust their learning. However, the new relationships with peers and teachers were repeatedly

mentioned in the interviews and played important roles in the transition. Several examples in the findings demonstrate the interactions with teachers and the collaborations with peers may reshape the students' learner identities and influence the development of learner autonomy.

Although the sample is small, the narratives in the findings are rich and touching, which hopefully can give the readers a deeper grasp of Chinese international students' lives and studies in the UK. The discussion chapter also presents a transition stage model, developing on the findings and related literature, to help the readers understand the process and the potential challenges during the transition towards learner autonomy.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Recent data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) shows that in 2013/14 the UK was the highest ranked country when it came to hosting international students. Chinese students still constitute the largest proportion of the non-EU student population in the UK (Peak, 2015). Just like all international students, Chinese students are experiencing a significant transition into the UK higher education system, which places an emphasis on cultivating autonomous and reflective learners who are able to understand, interpret and organise knowledge independently.

Many researchers have tried to understand the transition of Chinese students, including the challenges they encounter, the adjustments they make, and what they have experienced academically and socially. Research has suggested that many Chinese students in Western Higher Education Institutions have a clear sense of the differences between their prior learning experiences in China and their new teaching and learning environments, the most significant being mismatched expectations between teachers and students (e.g. Cross and Hitchcock, 2007), pedagogical communication approach (e.g. Li, 1999) and assessment methods (e.g. Turner, 2006). Many students realise that they are expected to be more autonomous learners in Western universities, and they are aware of their transitions during their studies, for example, of the need for increased self-confidence and more involvement in class interaction (Gu and Maley, 2008) and the emergent sense of independence and self-determination (Turner, 2006). Furthermore, research also shows that Chinese students are able to adapt and fulfil the requirements in new educational environments (Cross and Hitchcock, 2007; Rastall, 2006; Volet and Renshaw, 1996).

However, there are few studies published that explore the development of Chinese students' identities as learners. "Learners who accept responsibility for their learning are more likely to achieve their learning targets; and if they achieve their learning targets, they are more likely to maintain a positive attitude to learning in the future" (Little, 1995, p.176). When Chinese learners are exposed to a different learning community, how do they construct, develop, or even transform their learner identities via internal struggle, and negotiation between self and environment? Learner identities are often mentioned and researched in relation to learner autonomy and motivation, but mainly in the context of language learning, rather than that of master's programmes. Therefore, my study aims to fill this gap by conducting qualitative research with Chinese master's students at a Russell Group University in Scotland with a high proportion of international students. It followed 19 students for a whole academic year, in order to explore how their learner identities developed and were influenced during their individual and collective transitions. There was an emphasis on how students make meaning of their transitions. The results of the research are expected to contribute to a better understanding of how teaching and learning processes in the higher education institutions in the UK can be developed to better support Chinese learners.

1.2 My interest and personal background

I did my first degree in China in Economic Management at an average university during 2001-2005, then I worked as an English teacher in different language learning institutes in Beijing until 2011 when I reached a bottleneck in my career. At that moment in time I was teaching IELTS (an English test for international studies with a nine-band scale to identify levels of proficiency) to students who wanted to study abroad but was feeling

tired, not because of my long-hours teaching on a daily basis and weekends, but because I was tired of “helping” students who did not want to study and only wanted to learn the “techniques” of getting the band their target universities required in the exams. Such teaching is still prevalent in China in the language training schools which I simply think is wrong. I wanted to devote my time to those who really valued learning and were willing to make real efforts so I decided to pursue a PhD degree so that I could become a lecturer at a university.

I watched some videos online, for example, Professor Michael Sandel, who taught the course “Justice” at Harvard University, where he was scholarly, charming and interactive, facing hundreds of students. That image was pinned on my dream board, though it looks so naive now and my plan has changed with my shifted conception of teaching and newly developed interest in doing research. It was how I visualised myself in a few years although I was not very confident whether I could get to that point for two main reasons: I did not have any savings at the time, and the course fees and living expenses for both the master’s and PhD programmes could cost at least £80k; I was nearly 30 but still single. Both of the factors made my plan unrealistic and consequently there was resistance to my plan from both my family and friends. They could not understand why I was not placing focus on finding myself a husband, instead, I chose to give up my comfortable life with my flat in Beijing and my job with a relatively decent income, wanting to move to a foreign country myself and start an unknown life that may lead to nowhere.

Fortunately, I was not good at listening and I was used to going my own way so I chose for myself. I started saving and researching how to apply for universities in the UK and Australia. In 2003 – two years later – I was enrolled on a master’s programme in Psychology and Education at the University of Sheffield. After the long-term saving, I

was extremely motivated and wanted to make the best use of the time and the study, however, the high costs of the learning experience surprised me. First of all, we only had two lectures every week, 2.5 hours each, so instead of the heavy study load I expected, I had abundant free time that I did not know what to do with. Especially in the first month, slowing down my pace and doing nothing sometimes for a whole day made me frightened and guilty. What made the situation more concerning was the teachers were not teaching much during the contact hours, instead, they asked us to have group discussions, make posters and talk about what we thought. Therefore, I went to complain to my personal tutor who said she would note it down, but the situation did not seem to be improved. In addition, the teachers were generally not helpful as they only provided a longer reading list each time I went to ask questions. We had a different topic in ten different sessions and ten different essay topics accordingly to choose from for the assignment, which meant if I did not finish the essential reading list or understand one or more sessions, it would only be a little awkward during the discussions, no consequences followed.

It was not difficult to picture how my transition was particularly challenging. I had a long-term internal struggle and started to learn self-control and time-management, which was definitely beyond my preparation for the master's study because I was a hard-working teacher, and nobody would imagine a teacher would procrastinate in China. Furthermore, with the outdated basic knowledge of academic study up to 2005, when I graduated, I had never heard of critical thinking or referencing until I started to write my first essay, so I never understood the marking criteria until the end of my master's study. Since I could not figure out how to "please" the marker, I had to learn to stop caring about my grades and only tried to enjoy the reading and writing. Somehow the assignment results improved significantly.

In the end of the second semester, I learned that what I managed to acquire and develop was called *Learner Autonomy*, which Holec (1979) refers to as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p.3). I enjoyed the change of my learner identities towards a more autonomous learner with a more intrinsic motivation, for example, my motivation shifted away from seeking higher marks and the master's degree towards interest and self-fulfilment. Furthermore, I enjoyed myself as a more self-determined and mature adult, with a spirit of freedom, which I believed was the "side effect" learner autonomy brought along. However, the process of the transition was not all pleasant. I had a lot of struggles, and times where I felt helpless and wished I could get more support from my teachers and the university. This had become my initial motivation to choose this topic as I hope to help other international students who have to go through the same transitions, and to make the process more pleasant and enjoyable, and less traumatising.

1.3 The learning and living in a typical Chinese university

The longer I have stayed in the UK, the more I learned about the differences between the two different countries in terms of cultures, values, students' lives, students' expectations, and university requirements. It might help the readers understand what are particularly different in the UK HE learning and living environment if I introduce how it looks like studying in a typical Chinese university for an undergraduate degree. However, please keep in mind China has over a thousand universities and they may not share all the features I am about to list.

University regulations:

There are many rules in the Chinese universities, compared to the UK counterparts, although some of the universities may be more open than others, and each one may

have slightly different rules. For example: some universities do not permit romantic relationships and punish the couples caught having intimate behaviour such as holding hands on the campus; some do not allow bikes or skateboards on the campus; and some forbid mobile phones, laptops or music players to be taken to or used on the campus or in the classroom, but some rules only apply to first year undergraduate students.

There are many other rules though of course rules are only rules, and the punishment in each university and each school varies. Although many students still choose to ignore many of these rules by being discreet in their behaviour, they all know getting caught could result in punishment and humiliation in front of peers. For example, they may get yelled at or put on the spot, reported to their parents, given more homework, or their personal belongings may be confiscated. They may also be under peer pressure if the group or programme cohort was criticised in front of the staff and students because of their bad behaviour.

Accommodation:

In most of the universities in China, it is mandatory for students to live in the university accommodation which is usually a dormitory commonly shared by 4-8 people or more. Those dormitories are usually not en-suite, instead, there are one or two shared bathrooms on each level. Female and male dormitories are usually separated on different levels or in different buildings with members of the opposite sex being restricted from visiting. There are regulations in terms of keeping the dorm clean and the usage of electrical products. Furthermore, there are building managers living in the building to enforce a curfew and a specific time (around 11pm) to have all the lights switched off. From my own experience living in the dorm for four years, I would say I did not have much personal space and it was difficult to have any privacy. Often,

quarrelling happened between roommates due to lack of boundaries, for personal routines, habits and hygiene standards would affect people living in such close proximity to each other.

Catering:

There are no catering facilities available in the dormitory building, but every university in China has at least one dining hall to provide three meals a day for the students at a very affordable price. Cuisine is an important part of Chinese culture which may be beyond the understanding of some British people. Taking my experience for example, the significantly reduced varieties of food available in the UK, either ingredients and snacks in supermarkets or the selections in the restaurants, was torturous for me during my first year. Furthermore, it generally takes a longer amount of time to prepare a Chinese meal than a British meal. Therefore, feeding oneself could be a significant obstacle during the transition period, especially for those who don't know how to cook.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

The organisation of the thesis is as follows: Chapter 2, the Literature Review, explores critically the key concepts in this study, identities and learner autonomy in the sociocultural context, and introduces Chinese students' learning preferences stemming from Chinese culture. This chapter also compares Chinese and Western educational conceptions and how differences between them may affect students' learning experiences and expectations in China and UK from the perspectives of both small culture and large culture. Chapter 3, methodology, explains the development of the research questions and research methods, outlines the rationale for the research design, presents the detailed procedures involved in data collection, analysis and write up, and discusses reflexivity and possible ethical issues. Chapter 4 illustrates the key

findings of the study in four main themes, teaching, learning and assessment, teacher-student relationship, peer support and pressure, and why Chinese students are not silent or passive learners. Chapter 5 provides three case studies of three participants Rachael, Jack and Flora from different programmes with dramatic transition experiences, which demonstrate the great efforts students make in the transition and their negotiations between self and the Western world. Chapter 6 answers the research questions based on the findings of this study in terms of teaching, learning and assessment methods in the UK, and introduces a transition stage model to further explore students' adaptation in each stage of the transition. Chapter 7 concludes the study, critically reviews the strengths and weakness of the research and provides suggestions for UK universities and future research in this area.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

In order to explore the learner identities of Chinese international students and how they may change during the transition into the UK HE, the following key sections will be discussed in sequence in this chapter: I will attempt to define identity or identities in 2.2 by deconstructing the concept to I-self and Me-self, then I will test the two components in the sociocultural context and argue that the concept of identities is not only constructed personally but also deeply affected by cultures, values and the affinity groups in which students participate (2.3). Following this, I will discuss the concepts of learner autonomy and agency in 2.4, during which I will present a model called “shifted figured worlds” to demonstrate how students may transform their learner identities in accordance with the increasing contact and acceptance of the new environment in the UK and the gradual drift away from their home community.

In 2.5 I will explore the different teaching and learning methods across cultures and the psychological foundations that underpin them in order to explain the possible mindsets of teachers and students in the UK and China, and how the Western standard of evaluating a good learner may problematise Chinese students. However, this is not to say the West and East are in contrasting positions, instead, I will introduce a small culture point of view which in this research context refers to co-constructed learning communities constituted by both the students and teachers who carry their own cultural residues.

While the small culture perspective is more nuanced and valuable for understanding

Chinese learners' transitions, it is still important to consider the big culture traditions which may contribute to how particular small cultures are constituted. Therefore, I will develop my discussion about Chinese students' transition in the UK and try to explain their behaviour tendencies from their cultural backgrounds as well as their previous learning experience in 2.6 and 2.7.

2.2 Identities

Identity or rather identities is a complex concept that has been defined from numerous perspectives. At the broadest level, Harter (1999) defines identities as self-representation, namely "attributes or characteristics of the self that are consciously acknowledged by the individual through language" (p.3). In Harter's view, identities tend to be seen as inherent in individuals, or rather a cognitive construction that is perceived by self, because identities are determined by the way one describes self, for example: "who I am" and "how good I am". Harter developed on William James' (1980, cited in Harter, 1999) two distinct selves: self as a subject (I-self) and self as an object (Me-self). *I-self* is the decision-maker that represents one's self-awareness, while *Me-self* is the object knowledge of self or rather the "ideal self". Therefore, *I-self* perceives, determines towards which way *Me-self* is ideally constructed and develops, which constitute the "self-theory" (p.6-7). However, I would like to challenge Harter on her self-theory by posing two questions: Does the *I-self* make decisions independently? Is *Me-self* only constructed according to the decision of *I-self*? Social constructivists may propose a good answer to these questions, which I explain below.

First of all, a person's identities not only are defined by themselves, according to his/her memory and in his/her own words, but also depend on how others describe him/her (Bakhurst, 2001). People are living in shared communities with both shared memories

and distinct memories from personal angles. Such reflections from self and others can both inform identities. More importantly, language is an important medium of formation of identities; it is the prerequisite of the mutual engagement that makes practice in the community meaningful (Tusting, 2005). Especially for people who enter a new community of a vastly different culture, the grasp of the symbols in the language system of the community through human interaction is the pre-requisite for understanding meaning and thereby the integration into the community (Bruner, 1990; Kumar, 2000).

The construction of identities may be subjective as a process of internalisation; nonetheless, identities are social concepts. Apart from understanding and constructing the self, identities are also closely related to how a person understands and constructs his or her relationship to the world across time and contexts (Norton, 2000). Constructivists emphasise the influence of the social world in self-construction, i.e. the role of culture and context in developing individual and shared interpretations and understanding of reality (Pritchard and Woollard, 2010). “We are aware of ourselves, for we are aware of others, and in the same way as we know others; and this is as it is because we in relation to ourselves are in the same [position] as others are to us” (Vygotsky, 1979, cited in Kozulin, 1986, p.265). Social constructivists believe that we only build knowledge of our surroundings through discourse with others, or rather, through social interaction, because “knowledge is a social product, and learning is a social process. Meaning and understanding are forged out of an agreement between social partners which is honed by social interaction assisted by the essential medium and assumptions of language” (Pritchard and Woollard, 2010, p.9). Therefore, from social constructivists’ perspectives, *I-self* and *Me-self* cannot maintain and develop independently from the values and culture of the social world they exist in.

Holding a similar perspective, Wenger (1998) related the notion of identities to social practices in communities. He points out identities change constantly with time and space; not only do they exist in the form of language, i.e. how we describe ourselves, they are also informed through participating in specific communities. Wenger (1998) proposed three dimensions of competence as dimensions of identities: mutuality of engagement, accountability to an enterprise, and negotiability of a repertoire. *Mutuality of engagement* refers to the interaction and exchange in the living community. "We become who we are by being able to play a part in the relations of engagement that constitute our community" (p.152), in order to inform the meaning of the community, in turn to fulfil the meaning of ourselves. *Accountability* to an enterprise is the positions we hold that move us to look at the world in certain ways and the roles we play through which we understand the world under particular conditions. *Negotiability* of a repertoire reflects that the experience of our engagement in the community constitutes our personal history that contributes to our repertoire of a practice, and it creates individual relations with others and the community. In summary, our identities can be seen as our memberships in the community of practice.

In the context of this study, the communities are the learning and living environment at a world-ranked Scottish university, where the Chinese international students, although from different background and with different capacities, are expected to be autonomous as both learners and social beings. For example, within one-year master's study, students need to adapt to the pedagogies and assessment methods in their programmes if they are new to them, furthermore, they will work with peers and teachers from different cultural backgrounds and build new relationships. In addition to their studies, students also need to manage their lives in a foreign country, learning new manners, social protocols, cultures, and food and ingredients available in this country, etc. In the transition process, students' identities would be strongly influenced

by their learning and living communities, as well as their practice and negotiation in the communities, through which they understand *who they are* and *what they are capable of*. Moreover, via constant comparisons with others and their previous lives, students learn *who they are not* and *what they are not capable of* and thereby they inform and develop their identities as a learner and a social being.

Therefore, even though the focus of this study is learner identities, I will not place learner identities as a single category. Instead, I believe that identities are influenced by various factors and that learner identities cannot be considered separately from others, for example, a person's nationality, gender, occupation, family background, etc. Especially in the cross-cultural context, "each of these components is constructed through the discourses that are present in our culture" (Burr, 2003, p.107), and none of the individual or social factors can be "the sole cause or determinant constituting the social meanings of an individual's experience" (Moya, 2000, p.3). Thus, I will take Burr's (2003) definition of identities as the foundation of my study:

> Our identity is constructed out of the discourses culturally available to us, and which we draw upon in our communications with other people. A person's identity is achieved by a subtle interweaving of many different threads… All these, and many more, are woven together to produce the fabric of a person's identity. We are the end product, the combination, of the particular versions of these things that are available to us. (p.106-7)

In this study, I will mainly focus on observing and analysing participants' identities as learners, emphasising the discourses and cultures that underlie their UK learning communities and the students' prior learning communities, however, I also notice the close connection between learner identities and other issues such as age, personality, work experience and family background. Therefore, if any of the issues appear to be a significantly influential factor in the individual cases, I will draw these out and present

how they influence the learners' identities. Moreover, in this study of Chinese learners, it is important to draw out the contrast between individualistic and collectivistic societies and the dynamic change of power perceived by learners when entering into a new community with different power distance compared with their previous communities. I will illustrate my understanding of power and different societies in the next section.

2.3 Culture and power in the learning community

Triandis (1989) argues that the public self, which refers to cognition of others' perspectives of self, appears different in individualistic and collectivistic cultures. In individualistic cultures it is assumed that "autonomy, independence and self-reliance" are valued while collectivistic cultures emphasise the "conformity to the other in public settings" (p.514). Therefore, "the public self in collectivistic cultures is an extension of the collective self" (p.514). Individuals feel more obliged to behave according to the expectation of the in-group members, acquaintances, and potential in-group members. People are also more likely to sacrifice themselves for the benefit of the in-group.

Markus and Kitayama (1991) developed on Triandis's opinions and pointed out the "strikingly different" perceptions of self in individualistic and collectivistic cultures (p.224), and that the distinction makes a huge impact on how people see themselves, others and the community. The Western self is characterised as a more *independent self*, given the salient identities or rather the self-representation is situated more within the individual, and is obviously distinguished from that of others; in a collective society, the conception of self is viewed as *interdependent* due to "the fundamental connectedness of human beings to each other" (p.227). Individual uniqueness is less valued and is not critical to defining the identities of a person (see Figure 1).

Furthermore, an *independent self* seeks to achieve goals according to one's internal needs and achievement standard, whilst “experiencing interdependence entails seeing oneself as part of an encompassing social relationship and recognizing that one's behaviour is determined, contingent on, and, to a large extent organized by what the actor perceives to be the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others in the relationship” (p.227).

An important consequence of the two constructs of self in different cultures is that individuals are expected to play very different roles in their living communities: even though according to Wenger, the meaning is made through practice in the community, when Chinese students enter UK, where individuals tend to see themselves as independent rather than interdependent, and may unconsciously expect the new comers to have the same self-perception, Chinese students may not be able to perceive and understand swiftly about their new roles and manage to fulfil the new roles through practice in the new community. Furthermore, according to figure 1, when Chinese students come to the UK to study, will their social environment shift from B to A in the Figure? If others and the surrounding social context were included within the boundaries of the self (graph B) (Markus and Kitayama, 1991), as they enter the new environment, the attached members in their previous connectedness become distant physically and somewhat emotionally while the new relationships in the new community are either still strange or detached by default. Will the students’ identities shift from interdependent self towards independent self?

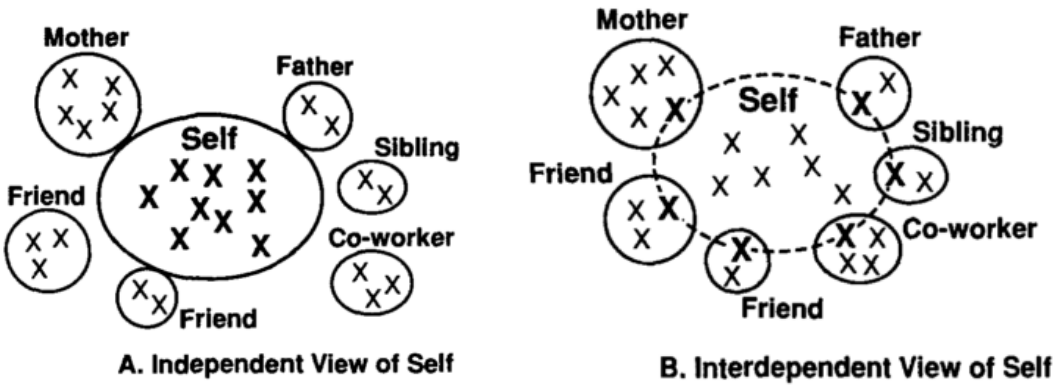

Figure 1 Conceptual representations of the self

(A: Independent construal. B: Interdependent construal.) (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p.226)

The arguments that Triandis, Markus and Kitayama made might be true to a large extent during the time their studies were carried out, however, as globalisation progresses, the distinction of the two different societies may not be so obvious that we can put them into two contrasting categories. The public self is in fact sensitive to the evaluation of significant others to different degrees or in different aspects in individualistic and collectivistic cultures, rather than being defined dichotomously into independent self and interdependent self. To be more specific, independent self and interdependent self both exist in individual selves across cultures, but one of them may appear to be dominant in one's identities. Therefore, when comparing the differences between individualistic cultures and collectivistic cultures, it may be more appropriate to say "in individualistic cultures, there is a higher probability of sampling the independent self, while in collectivistic cultures there is a higher probability of sampling the interdependent self" (Somech, 2000, p.163). Such hypothesis has been tested by many researchers, for example, Trafimow et al. (1991) compared students from a collective culture (Chinese) with students from an individualistic culture (North American) and found that participants with individualistic cultural backgrounds

retrieved more self-cognitions of independent self, and fewer self-cognitions of interdependent self, than participants with collectivistic cultural backgrounds.

To understand this notion, we need to discuss Hofstede's (1980, 1986) four-dimensional model of cultural differences: *individualism vs. collectivism*, *power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity vs. femininity* as an empirical basis, in which the first two dimensions are closely related to the context of this research.

Individualism vs. Collectivism

Individualism opposes collectivism, as a characteristic of a culture, where it is assumed that individuals tend to be self-oriented and self-determined, in order to achieve benefits and meet the needs of self and immediate family (spouse, children). In contrast, in a collectivistic society, it is assumed that "people are born into extended families or clans which protect them in exchange for loyalty" (Hofstede, 1980, p.235), therefore the collective needs and benefit are emphasised.

Power distance

Power distance is used as a criterion for characterising different cultures and societies that maintain inequality in hierarchies. Mulder (1977) defines power as "the potential to determine or direct (to a certain extent) the behaviour of another person/other persons more so than the other way around" and power distance as the "degree of inequality in power between a less powerful Individual (I) and a more powerful Other (O), in which I and O belong to the same (loosely or tightly knit) social system" (p.98, cited in Hofstede, 1980). Cultures with larger power distance tend to value social hierarchies, therefore individuals place high value on obedience and conformity to their

superiors (parents, teachers, supervisors, etc.), whilst in a smaller power distance culture, individuals are given more freedom and equal rights are valued and more prevalently accepted.

Hofstede proposed two tables to compare the two dimensions in the context of teaching and learning respectively (Table 1 and Table 2). However they were criticised by many who suggest human societies are complicated therefore, it may not be appropriate to allocate any society simply into one of the dimensions (Peng et al., 2006). Especially in individual cases, the interaction between a student and a teacher may be more dynamic and it may lie in both dimensions or even beyond the dimension that the table describes. However, the table may provide a general comparison for the two extreme teaching and learning systems, which reflect the consequence of and important impact of, cultures in the formation of teaching and learning cultures.

For the Chinese students who demonstrate more of the culture and values from a collective society and believe in a large power distance relationship with the superiors, such as parents and teachers, their transition experience may be more challenging and require additional support. Due to the conflict between individualism and collectivism, small and large power distance, the adjustment may also include the constant review and questioning of their own culture and values as they gradually understand and adapt into the new culture. Some students may struggle to choose which values to adopt or make compromise to and even develop hybrid values. Evidence indicates that “cross-cultural encounters can provide an excellent opportunity for personal growth by placing us in situations where our understanding of self and world, and of how we believe things ‘are’ or ‘should be’ is severely challenged” (Montuori and Fahim, 2004, p.244). However, encounters with a limited time to make adjustment and insufficient support to help them not only spot but understand the differences can be problematic. For

example, in some of the schools in China, many Chinese students are identified as a "good" student according to teachers' preference, more specifically, teacher's affirmation and punishment to some extent scaffold students' behaviour. Therefore, teachers' personal opinions can be requirements for students to follow and failing to obey may result in punishment. Whereas, in the new learning environment where students are expected to be autonomous and teachers provide support largely by encouraging and making suggestions rather than giving commands, not to mention any punishment, some students may be confused and even lost if they feel the suddenly acquired free will is unbearable. For another example, in the Chinese schools, assessment results and thereby a student's class rank can decide how much the individual is valued and therefore study, to some of the students, is not just her/his priority but the whole life purpose. When students fail to make high assessment achievement as before, they may lose their confidence and start to question their competence, their decision to study in the UK and maybe even their personal value.

COLLECTIVIST SOCIETIES	INDIVIDUALIST SOCIETIES
• positive association in society with whatever is rooted in tradition[1]	•positive association in society with whatever is "new"
• the young should learn; adults cannot accept student role[2]	•one is never too old to learn; "permanent education"
• students expect to learn how to do	•students expect to learn how to learn
• individual students will only speak up in class when called upon personally by the teacher	•individual students will speak up in class in response to a general invitation by the teacher
• individuals will only speak up in small groups[3]	•individuals will speak up in large groups
• large classes split socially into smaller, cohesive subgroups based on particularist criteria (e.g. ethnic affiliation)	•subgroupings in class vary from one situation to the next based on universalist criteria (e.g. the task "at hand"
• formal harmony in learning situations should be maintained at all times (T-groups are taboo)[4]	•confrontation in learning situations can be salutary; conflicts can be brought into the open
• neither the teacher nor any student should ever be made to lose face	•face-consciousness is weak
• education is a way of gaining prestige in one's social environment and of joining a higher status group ("a ticket to a ride")	•education is a way of improving one's economic worth and self-respect based on ability and competence
• diploma certificates are important and displayed on walls	•diploma certificates have little symbolic value
• acquiring certificates, even through illegal means (cheating, corruption) is more important than acquiring competence	•acquiring competence is more important than acquiring certificates
• teachers are expected to give preferential treatment to some students (e.g. based on ethnic affiliation or on recommendation by an influential person)	•teachers are expected to be strictly impartial

1. e.g. Treviño, 1982
2. Lieh-Mak et al., 1984
3. Redding, 1980: 211
4. e.g. Cox and Cooper, 1977

Table 1 Differences in Teacher/Student and Student/Student Interaction Related to the Individualism versus Collectivism Dimension

(Hofstede, 1986, p.312)

SMALL POWER DISTANCE SOCIETIES	LARGE POWER DISTANCE SOCIETIES
• stress on impersonal "truth" which can in principle be obtained from any competent person	•stress on personal "wisdom" which is transferred in the relationship with a particular teacher (guru)
• a teacher should respect the independence of his/her students	•a teacher merits the respect of his/her students[1]
• student-centered education (premium on initiative)	•teacher-centered education (premium on order)
• teacher expects students to initiate communication	•students expect teacher to initiate communication
• teacher expects students to find their own paths	•students expect teacher to outline paths to follow
• students may speak up spontaneously in class	•students speak up in class only when invited by the teacher
• students allowed to contradict or criticize teacher	•teacher is never contradicted nor publicly criticized[2]
• effectiveness of learning related to amount of two-way communication in class[3]	•effectiveness of learning related to excellence of the teacher
• outside class, teachers are treated as equals	•respect for teachers is also shown outside class
• in teacher/student conflicts, parents are expected to side with the student	•in teacher/student conflicts, parents are expected to side with the teacher
• younger teachers are more liked than older teachers	•older teachers are more respected than younger teachers

1. according to Confucius, "teacher" is the most respected profession in society
2. E.g. Faucheux et al, 1982
3. Revans, 1965; Jamieson and Thomas, 1974; Stubbs and Delamont, 1976

Table 2 Differences in Teacher/Student and Student/Student Interaction Related to the Power Distance Dimension

(Hofstede, 1986, p.313)

Chalmers and Volet (1997) emphasise that we need to be very cautious that these cultural issues should not be used as an excuse for avoiding making transformation and improvement at the university. For example, teachers may stop exploring how to

motivate Chinese students in various ways once they attribute the "problem" to the students or their culture. Furthermore, the stereotype may inform and influence Asian students' learner identities. Students may fulfil this negative expectation by accepting this stereotype intentionally or unintentionally, even using it as excuse for their low academic achievement. On the other hand, understanding these cultural issues may lead to new questions for the teachers: shall the teachers in Western countries make an effort to fulfil the expectation of Chinese students, especially when they are facing a classroom with a majority of the students from China? Or shall the teachers retain their teaching method and require the students to adapt into the new learning system? They are difficult questions and there are no right answers. I hope this study may at least encourage educators to carry on exploring for solutions which might work in different contexts.

2.4 Learner autonomy

The concept of learner autonomy, pioneered in adult education and self-access learning systems in the 1980s, then included in learner-centred theories, which is developed to focus on how knowledge is learned (rather than what is learned) and on learners' personal development (Little, 2007). On one hand, learners are expected to take control of their own learning, i.e. deciding what and how they will learn, therefore, learners are no longer just responsively learning what they have been directed to learn by others (Benson, 2011). On the other hand, the practice of being autonomous in learning is considered to contribute to the enhancement of learners' ability to be autonomous in life and therefore become autonomous as social beings, and vice versa (Littlewood, 1996).

However, some argue that the concept of learner autonomy may not be suitable and

sufficient for everyone, for example, the learners from different cultural backgrounds and learners with different learning purposes. These issues particularly interest me because my research participants are Chinese master's students in the UK higher education, and cultural issues are important components in my research scope. In particular, Chinese students have been treated as a special group in a large number of previous research. For example, David Watkins' and John Biggs' proposed the "Paradox of the Chinese learners" (Watkins and Biggs, 1996, 2001), trying to understand the Chinese students from their cultural backgrounds and learning habits. I appreciate the analysis and understanding Watkins and Biggs have provided, nevertheless, as a Chinese learner myself in a foreign country, I do not agree that the Chinese students should be labelled and expected as a group to all have similar behaviours and perspectives. There are more complicated reasons causing a learner's behaviour in every step of his/her learning process than a learner's cultural background or previous learning environment, especially when the learner is relocated in a foreign country and at a higher level of education.

2.4.1 Learner autonomy as a capacity

Learner autonomy was initially defined as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec, 1979, p.3). This definition has been challenged and interpreted over the years and two key words have been highlighted: *ability* and *take charge.* On one hand*, taking charge / control* is interpreted by Benson (2011) as learners' control over decision making and the cognitive process. Furthermore, he developed the concept by proposing a third dimension – "a social aspect to control over learning content, which involves the learner's ability to negotiate over goals, purposes, content and resources with others" (p.60). The negotiation with the learning community also a process of exploring and extending a learner's comfortable zone as the purpose of learner

autonomy is not towards learners' complete independence from others, teachers, peers or anyone and anything in the learning community, "because we are social beings our independence is always balanced by dependence; our essential condition is one of interdependence." (Little, 1991, p.5) Therefore, autonomy is not complete detachment, rather, it is the capacity of control and negotiation.

On the other hand, "ability" was replaced by "capacity" by later authors but was interpreted in different ways. Little (1991), in his definition, indicates that learner autonomy is "a capacity – for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action" (p.4). Littlewood (1999) developed this theory by proposing two forms of autonomy: proactive and reactive autonomy. Proactive autonomy means learners taking charge of their own learning, deciding what their objectives are, gathering and organising their own resources, and then conducting a review of what has been achieved. Reactive is very similar to the above but means that learners take external suggestions from their learning advisors and peer support group as to how to organise their means of learning. That is to say, proactive learners take more responsibility in terms of setting learning targets and assessing learning achievement, which clearly demonstrates a higher level of self-management in learning.

In addition to this, Littlewood (1996) further enriched the concept of learner autonomy by pointing out ability and willingness are the two components of learners' capacity. In other words, learners may have the ability to manage their learning but do not have the motivation to take the responsibility because "such behaviour is not perceived as appropriate to his or her role in a particular situation" (p.428). Therefore, according to Littlewood, if learners decide not to take responsibility for their learning, but are merely responding to the requirements of the teachers and the assessment and make minimum effort only wanting to pass and get a degree, they cannot be regarded as

autonomous learners, although they are making an autonomous decision to be strategic in learning. As Littlewood explained, learners need to have both the "motivation" and the "confidence" to be determined in learner autonomy. Huang (2009) also claims that this type of learning is more properly described as "instances of agency rather than autonomy" (p.75), if assuming autonomy is more about learners' capacities than behaviours.

Learner autonomy is frequently described as having different levels of intensity. For example, Bovill's and Bulley's (2011) "Ladder of student participation in curriculum design" (Figure 2) depicts a dynamic relationship between the students and the tutors in distinct levels of learner autonomy and also indicates the highest level as students fully in control of their learning, with substantial capacity to make decisions. However, Bovill and Bulley also point out that the higher on the ladder is not necessarily better, instead, the most suitable would be student's most comfortable and confident status that fits in their current situation.

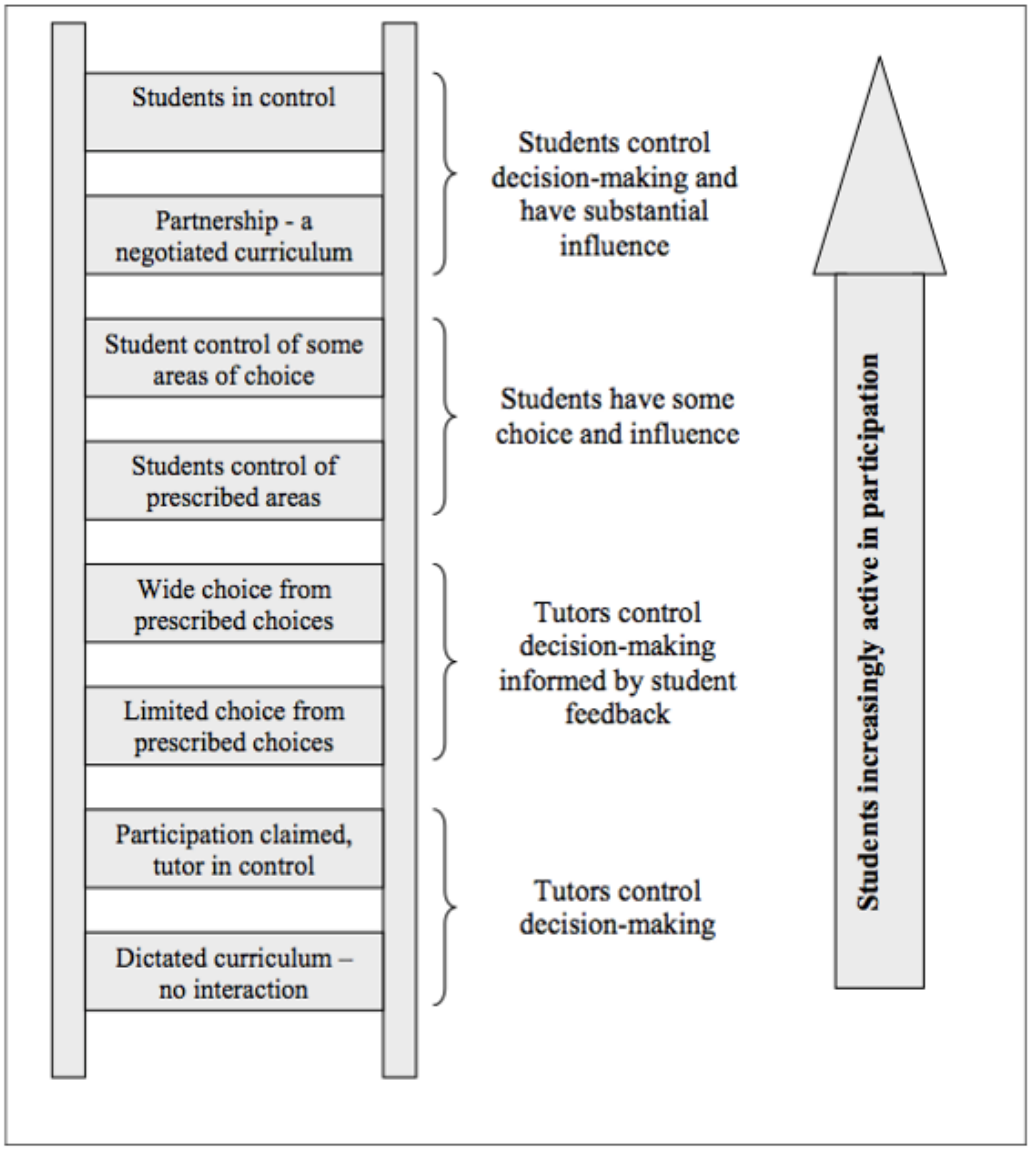

Figure 2 Ladder of student participation in curriculum design

(Bovill and Bulley, 2011, p.5)

2.4.2 Autonomy and agency

Little (1991) developed George Kelly's concept of "personal construct" (p.17) and

emphasised the necessity of fostering “conscious autonomy” (p.20), which allows learners to monitor and control their learning process with a full awareness and a clear purpose. “Personal construct” refers to how individuals make sense of their experience, which, according to George Kelly, a psychologist and psychotherapist, is constantly revised according to the new incidents occurring in individuals’ lives. Little further illustrated that personal constructs are still within the boundary of the culture, communal assumptions and values of the society, where the individuals live and are “acquired unconsciously from birth onwards” (p.18). Personal constructs are also essential for people to define their culture and the shared values. However, personal constructs are unique to each individual, “for they are constantly shaped and reshaped by our attempts to make sense of the experience that is ours and ours alone.” (p.18)

On the other hand, Toohey and Norton (2003), holding similar interest in the individual engagement and awareness, have provided a different perspectives from socio-culturalists’ point of view. They suggest that autonomy goes beyond individual behaviours and performance. They conceptualised learner autonomy as “socially situated agency” within specific culture and community settings (Toohey, 2007, p.232). Toohey and Norton (2003) claim that learners need to activate their agency to access to learning community. This concept was then taken further by Yamaguchi (2011) whose research provided an example of a shy and passive Japanese language learner activating and developing her agency. After this learner had realised it was important to be active and not afraid of making mistakes, with the help of a learning role model, she finally grew to be an autonomous learner. The research shows that learner agency can be activated by resources offered by the learning community. However, learners need to take the agency to initiate their “conscious autonomy”, as “agency is learner’s will or drive to learn” (Yamaguchi, 2011, p. 270)

Furthermore, Norton and Toohey questioned that Wenger's (1998) concept of *learning community* does not specify learning resources, culture and a person's practice, therefore, they adopted Holland et al.'s (1998) notion of *figured worlds*, which, according to them, has a better focus on the individuals' history, understanding and agency when describing the situated nature of the individuals.

Holland defined a figured world as a:

> socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognised, significance is assigned to certain acts and particular outcomes are valued over others. Each is a simplified world populated by a set of agents … who engage in a limited range of meaningful acts or change of state … as moved by a specific set of forces … (p. 52)

According to Holland, figured worlds can exist in a multi-dimensional and overlapping shape, which no longer only look at the learners from their personality, background, and personal experience. This also provides a microscope to look into the learners' particular behaviours and reactions in particular settings and position in time.

In the context of my research, I would like to take the notion of "figured worlds" further to fit more closely to the individual participant's actual experience in order to investigate whether and how a learner's agency is activated and how her/his identities are shifted in each stage in responding to the change of one's perceived UK and home communities in both life and study. The master's students may experience a few stages in their transition across the academic year and may adopt different techniques to respond to different and even the same incidents, according to which stage they are in. For example, when students first arrived in this foreign country, they are immediately disadvantaged to some extent, no matter how sensitive they are to the new community. Students may bend themselves to fit into the environment and may

automatically assume the incidents occurring are reasonable in this country, although they are sometimes strange and difficult to understand. Chinese students are eager to learn the “rules” from everything they see and experience and may try to embrace them unconditionally. However, after a few months of living and studying in the new community, through constant negotiation with the new environment, some of the students may have a sense of what rules to follow and what they can circumvent without consequences. They may also start to question the rules and test the boundaries, where the students may practise their autonomy through which their identities may be reshaped.

Therefore, taking the notion of figured worlds, combining the concept of Community of Practice and Burr’s definition of identities that both emphasise the interaction and negotiation with self and others in the living communities, I created the shifted figured worlds (figure 3) to represent a potential transition pattern: learner’s identities may be reshaped as the progressive perception and acceptance of the UK communities and meanwhile the developing distance and alienation from the communities and affinity with the home country. Such a shift may not happen to every student but may also happen repeatedly to some individuals at different stages of her/his study, depending on the personal experience and reaction. The change can be either proactive or reactive however the research places focus on the personal construct and agency as those are more likely to provide traceable path of the transition process.

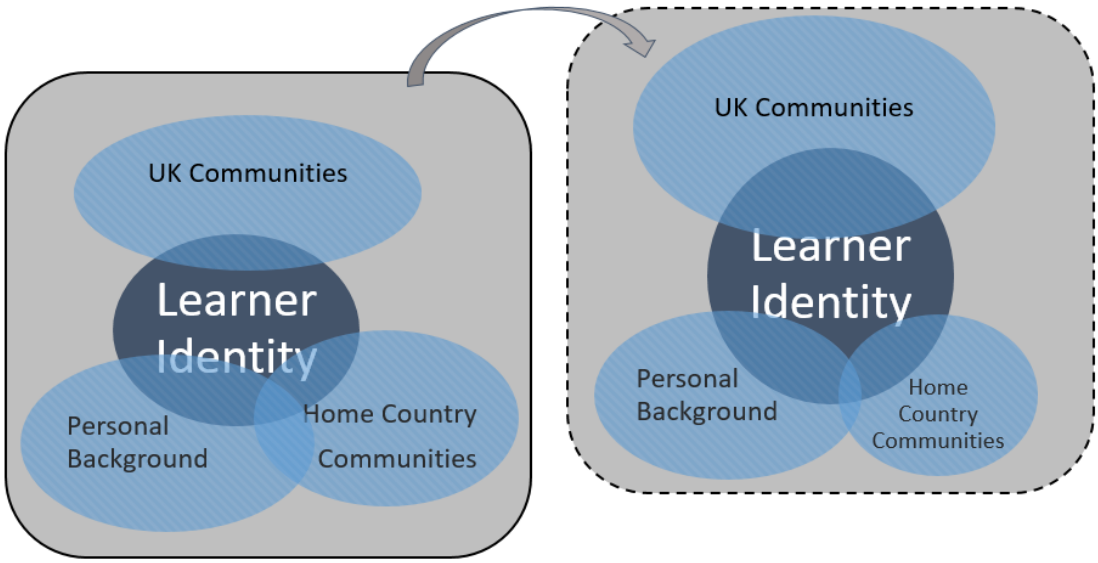

Figure 3 Shifted Figured World(s)

(Burr, 2003; Holland et al., 1998; Wenger, 1998)

Clearly, different students will act differently and make different decisions in this process, which Holland et al. (1998) called "improvisation", referring to the phenomenon that people can act differently upon different levels of motivation and different environment settings. This is why my research is focusing on each student as an individual case. As Toohey (2007) argued: "within different cultural or figured worlds, many different kinds of educational arrangements 'make sense' – and that when educational change is hoped for, attention must be paid (at least) to the persons involved, their resources and their practices" (p.238).

However, as I have argued about the different stages of the transition, it is worth noticing that students are not always consciously reacting to the new learning environment, when they have to compromise about the various rules, for example, the format requirement of writing an essay, or being pushed to express their opinions in the classroom. They may be overwhelmed by all the requirement and be cognitively

occupied with adaptation without having a chance to fully understand and critically accept the new community. In that case, the figured worlds are not constructed by individuals, based on their cognition and conscious choices, rather, students are under pressure from the new and strange environment, with incomplete information and unfamiliar requirements. Therefore, students are merely doing the best to respond; there is not much space for them to improvise.

2.4.3 Learner autonomy and resistance

From the sociological dimension, Littlewood (1996), proposed a three-stage model within the scope of second language acquisition (Figure 4). Littlewood argued that the opportunities of making and carrying out decisions can promote learners' capacity of being autonomous in three aspects: exercising the target language in the communication, exercising autonomy in learning as a learner and in other domains of life as an autonomous person. The model represents a popular trend: the expectation for the learners has gone beyond the domain of learning knowledge and information and being able to grasp what it is to learn and how to learn. Fostering learner autonomy, to some authors and educators, also means leading learners to be autonomous as a person and a social being.

However, such a transformation, from an autonomous learner to an autonomous social being, does not happen automatically. Factors such as the form of government, the dominant ideology, and the culture in learners' home country may affect and even terminate the transition so learners may find themselves in an awkward position, as a learner in the host country and a citizen in the home country, where different rules apply. Therefore, if the learner has successfully adapted in the autonomous learning environment, they may have to reconnect with their home country, making adaptations

again to fit in the new environment with different expectations and requirements. In fact, the more learners have adapted in the UK environment, the more demanding the reconnection will be. Similarly, the more learners realise such a challenge may come in the future, the more likely they are to be resistant to making a change in the first place.

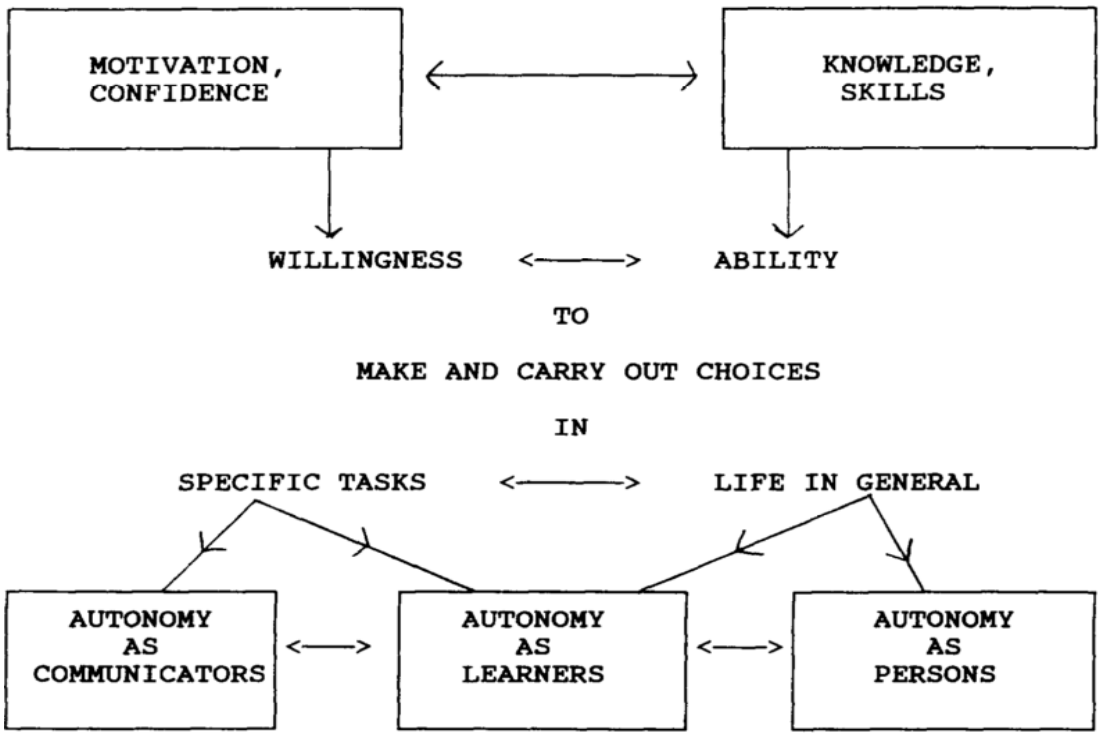

Figure 4 Components and domains of autonomy in foreign language learning

(Littlewood, 1996, p. 430)

Moreover, as I discussed in the previous section, Littlewood claims willingness and ability are two dimensions of a learner's capacity. There may be another dimension missing: necessity – whether the learners have perceived they are obliged to take control and to practise decision-making. Previous research reveals that learner autonomy and reflective teaching are sometimes resisted because learners do not associate the development of their autonomy with the progress of their learning. In

Tsang's (1999, cited in Jing & Huang, 2006) research in the higher education institutions in Hong Kong, it was noticed that when learners did not acquire immediate and direct benefit from developing learner autonomy in their learning, they tended to resist the idea of learner autonomy in their language learning programmes, because the main purpose of their study was for the acquisition of language skills rather than the ability of autonomy. In other words, these learners valued what is learned more than how it is learned and did not believe learner autonomy could contribute to learning achievement.

We also need to be aware that the development of learner autonomy is not always balanced, as Little (1991) argued "The fact is that autonomy is likely to be hard-won and its permanence cannot be guaranteed; and the learner who displays a high degree of autonomy in one area may be non-autonomous in another." (p.6) Furthermore, Little also pointed out overemphasising learner autonomy may cause learners to be disoriented. If the development of the techniques of being autonomous is rewarded more in the classroom than acquiring knowledge, learning may lose its prior purpose.

2.5 Teaching and learning across cultures

In order to understand the different expectations of Chinese students and their teachers in the UK, I will, in this section, explore the different teaching and learning methods across cultures (2.5.1) and the psychological foundations that underpin them (2.5.2). These discussions compare teacher-centred and student-centred education in order to help us understand the fundamental conceptions and expectations in teaching and learning across cultures. The following discussion will lead to a point where the Western and Chinese pedagogy are seen to be somewhat in contrast. Examining this contrast illuminates the situation in UK international education where some Chinese

students are often disadvantaged or problematised because their learning strategies and engagement methods are not recognised according to Western criteria (2.5.3). In 2.5.4 I move on to present an alternative perspective on cultural issues by introducing the concept of small cultures, which in this research context refers to co-constructed learning communities constituted by both the students and teachers who carry their own cultural residues (Holliday, 1999). This provides a different and more apposite lens for this study.

2.5.1 Teacher-centred vs. student-centred teaching and learning

Kember and Gow (1990) gave Biggs' Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ) (Biggs, 1987) to a sample of 1043 students in Hong Kong. The findings related to the deep and achieving approach scales were reasonably consistent with those obtained in Western countries. However, Kember and Gow found that Hong Kong students predominantly described a "narrow orientation" rather than "surface orientation", in relation to their attempt to understand the information before committing to memorisation. Kember and Gow summarised the distinguishing features of the narrow orientation as:

- learning tasks are defined by the lecturer;
- understanding is sought in a narrow but systematic, step-by-step approach;
- as each part of the task is understood, an attempt is made to memorise the pertinent details. (p.361)

Kember (1997) later proposed a model of conceptions of teaching (Figure 5), involving 5 categories: imparting information, transmitting structured knowledge, student-teacher interaction, facilitating understanding, and conceptual change/intellectual development. The first two categories belong to the teacher-centred orientation and

the last two belong to the student-centred orientation; the middle one plays an intermediary role between the two orientations. Biggs and Tang (2011) argue that the conception of teaching the teachers hold decides what the teacher does in the teaching practice and there is a developmental sequence:

At Level 1, teachers tend to focus on their own capacity for knowledge and ability to elaborate it clearly. In other words, teaching is mainly transmitting information and learning is to receive it accurately. Therefore, differences in learning result are attributed to individual students' personal ability and effort. Teachers at level 2 still operate based on transmission but of a more sophisticated structure of knowledge rather than straight transmission of information. Those teachers value teaching skills and competencies, and notably, they take the blame for students' poor performance. When teachers reach Level 3, they understand what matters is not how teachers teach but how students learn. Therefore, the focus is no longer on how competent the students are, or the teachers can be, but on how to engage the students in the learning process according to their ability and aims in each stage to eventually achieve the desired outcomes.

The first two levels depict a similar scenario to Kember and Gow's "narrow orientation", where students' agency is largely omitted, and the learning outcome is subject to teachers' plans and performance. The third level corresponds with Kember's "student-centred model", where teachers play a role as a facilitator, supporting and individualising students' learning processes. However, I do not entirely agree that the three levels are in a developmental sequence of conceptions of teaching. In the context of my research, I would prefer to place them into different categories, as different conceptions instead of levels of conceptions, because the conception of teaching a teacher holds is determined not only by the teacher's career experience and

development, but also by the state's education policy, the social and academic culture; and it is closely aligned to the daily teaching practice and the assessment methods. For example, Gaokao, a high-stake national examination has in effect guided school education in China. It is designed by the exam committee of each province rather than schoolteachers and has been criticised as promoting assessment-oriented education, for it contains a high proportion of concept related questions which can be approached with memorisation. This type of assessment can encourage both teachers and students to place all their efforts in the daily educational practices on transmitting information rather than on processing it in a critical way. This will be discussed further in 2.6.3.

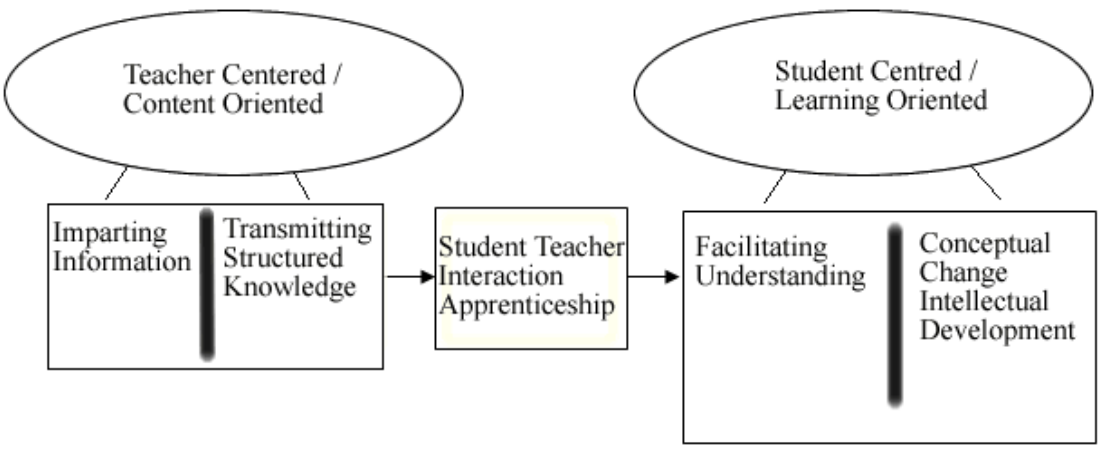

Figure 5 A multiple-level categorisation model of conceptions of teaching

(Kember, 1997, p.264)

As I mentioned previously, teacher-centred and student-centred education can be found in both China and the UK in different institutions. However, due to the nature of the assessments and the larger class-size in China, students who grew up there are more familiar with teacher-centred education and have mastered more of the corresponding coping techniques and learning methods. Although there is no obvious line separating them completely, there are different psychological foundations behind

these two prototypes of teaching which will be explored in the next section and could help us understand the different conceptions teachers and students tend to hold as they play their roles in different types of teaching and learning activities.

2.5.2 Behaviourism vs constructivism

The teacher-centred education can be viewed as based on behaviourism which approaches teaching and learning from a deterministic perspective: “behaviour and learning are believed to be rule-based and operate under predictable and constant conditions over which the individual learner has no or little control” (Dousay, 2015, p.61). In this sense, human behaviours are objectified and therefore can be reinforced and modified under the stimuli of rewards and penalties (Schunk, 2012). However, from the early 20th century, studies within the behaviourist tradition set out to establish how best to shape learning and behaviour (Skinner, 1953; Thorndike, 1932). Guided by this body of work, contemporary schools have employed different systems of behaviour modification. All of these systems share one purpose – to drive the productivity of learning (Ching, 2012), for example, an effective reward and penalty system could largely improve students’ attendance rate.

Behaviourists believe knowledge can be transmitted from teachers to learners; and accuracy and authority are seen as crucial elements to ensure the quality of the reproduction. This has provided a rationale for the extensive adoption of transmissive lectures (Dousay, 2015), which have their origins in both the West and East, where the great sages of ancient Greece or China, for example, passed on their wisdom to the masses. Research shows that a transmissive lecture is an effective method to transmit information; however, it is ineffective for promoting critical thinking or inspiring interest in a subject (Dousay, 2015). In order to increase the efficiency of the lecture in

transferring information to long-term memory, transmissive lectures can be interactive at times to engage the learners. Some lectures may leave time for a brief discussion or ask for comments or questions. However, this is still fundamentally different from an interactive lecture, which will be illustrated in relation to constructivism.

Learner centred education, on the other hand, is largely built on constructivist perspectives, which emphasise individual agency, freedom of decision-making and social influences on learning. Carl Rogers, the founder of the humanistic approach to psychology was reporesentative of this conception of learning. He believed that a teacher cannot teach a learner but can only let them learn; a teacher can only facilitate the learning process (Rogers, 1994). This was based on his individual-centred approach which attributed the full functionality of a human being to the premise that everyone is the centre of her/his world which consists of one's perception and experience. (Rogers, 1959)

The belief is that knowledge is subjective in nature, constructed from our perceptions of experience and mutually agreed conventions rather than acquired by memorising what is transmitted from the known to the unknown. Therefore, the individual's background and how individuals sense their experience are essential to what is learned and how it is learned. The teaching and learning processes and outcomes for individual learners vary unavoidably, depending on what each learner brings to the classroom, how much they understand and in what way they relate information to their existing knowledge. (Dousay, 2015)

Constructivists believe students do not merely react to the teaching and learning environment, they instead, have the capacity to alter the environment for their own purposes. Taking into account the sociocultural aspects of Vygotsky's theory, the way

that learners interact with the persons, objects, cultures, communities that surround them reshapes how they think and transforms their learning experience. (Schunk, 2012; Tudge and Scrimsher, 2003) However, interaction is not helpful if students are merely provided with information, as in some traditional forms of education (Tudge and Scrimsher, 2003). In order to enhance the learning process, teachers should structure situations for students to be actively engaged with learning content, thus, how teachers facilitate classroom activities has a significant impact on how students construct knowledge (Schunk, 2012).

Social constructivists believe discussion and interaction can challenge and enhance what each learner understands (Dousay, 2015). They facilitate the exchange of ideas, especially between those with common ground – the communities of people who have mutual agreement on what constitutes valid knowledge. “The means by which this is done are complex and multi-faceted, from personal reflection, seeking new information, to testing ideas through social contact with others … Reality is always tentative and dynamic.”(p.61) Therefore, the interactive lectures, seminars, workshops and tutorials commonly adopted in Western education, feature as means to facilitate knowledge co-construction by organising relevant and coherent communication (Lin, 2015) and through transforming experience (Kolb, 1984).

It is difficult to define a single philosophy that is dominating the Chinese education system as although it was structured by Confucianism, it was then integrated with multiple models borrowed from other contexts, such as Japan and Germany in the early 20th century and the former Soviet Union in the 1950s (Corcoran, 2014; Liu and Wu, 2006). The contemporary model is profoundly influenced by both behaviourism and constructivism. The former was adopted from the late 1970s driven by China’s rapid economic development which required a large number of trained labourers.

Behaviourism was seen as a way to instruct curricula efficiently to ensure that the needed skills were taught and reproduced (Corcoran, 2014). In the meantime, unified behaviour and thought rather than diversity were preferred in order to maintain the society under the communist party, which was therefore in favour of the massive duplication approach of transmissive education.

Constructivism on the other hand, started to receive attention from the late 1990s in order to meet the ever-changing demands of a knowledge economy (Tan, 2017). The Ministry of Education in China (MOE) carried out a series of nation-wide educational reforms in curriculum and pedagogy, aiming to cultivate "students fully developed in all aspects" who are "imbued with a spirit of innovation, practical ability, and foundational knowledge, skills and methods to engage in lifelong learning" (Huang, 2009; MOE, 2001, p. 1; Tan, 2017, p.241) This is known as "quality education" (suzhi jiaoyu) in contrast to the prior "examination-oriented education" (yingshi jiaoyu). Correspondingly, the pedagogical reform focused on "shifting from an over-emphasis on passive learning, rote memorisation and mechanical training to one that promotes students' active participation, independent inquiry, practical ability, problem-solving skills and teamwork" (MOE, 2001, p. 1; Tan, 2017, p. 241)

Since the launch of the reforms, a flurry of new policies have been initiated across the country in primary and secondary schools, where actions are taken accordingly in terms of curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, as well as in school management and teacher education (Tan, 2017). Though not endorsed officially, constructivism has been favoured for it supports the transition from an "assessment-oriented" to a "quality-oriented" system via a student-centred approach. However, constructivism and the assumptions that underpin it are also criticised and resisted by Chinese scholars, students and parents for being contextually inappropriate, (see further discussion in

2.6).

Overall, the advantages of student-centred teaching, self-directed learning and their underlying philosophy have been broadly recognised in schools and universities in China since the educational reform. However, the dominant educational aims and practices are still deeply influenced by indigenous educational conceptions, cultures and economic status.

2.5.3 Problematising Chinese students' transitions

From Western perspectives, Chinese students, compared to students from other areas worldwide, are sometimes caricatured as being passive non-participants (Chalmers and Volet, 1997) and largely extrinsically motivated (which is regarded negatively in the Western context) (Kember, 2000); and they are sometimes described as lacking the abilities of independent and critical thinking, being insufficiently autonomous in their learning practices. Classroom communication is often viewed as difficult since, according to some lecturers, they normally give "no indications of understanding or lack of understanding", (Gieve and Clark, 2005, p.262). In addition to this, studies also indicate that Chinese students, compared with their American peers, tend to avoid criticising each other or putting themselves in an authority-like position. Instead, they are more comfortable maintaining a harmonious atmosphere when placed in a study group (Carson and Nelson, 1996).

Studies like these highlight the potential for mismatched expectations between Chinese international students and their teachers in Western HE. Many scholars try to explain the phenomenon simplistically by comparing the two different teaching and learning systems. Catterick (2007) refers to the conflict as "philosophical dissonance", which

implies the psychological discomfort and frustration perceived by people when participating in a host culture that is essentially conflicting with their inherent values and educational culture. As previously discussed, student-centred learning, i.e. active learning, reflective practice, collaborative learning and group discussion are all rooted in a Western cognitive constructivist tradition (Fox, 2001), indicating that the stereotype of Chinese students' learning styles, e.g. rote learning, silent learning and passive learning, may be identified according to these Western criteria in the Western learning context (Sit, 2013).

Going beyond the simplistic debate around whether the Western teaching and learning practices are suitable for Chinese students, previous research has also offered many examples (Cross and Hitchcock, 2007; Lee, 1996; Wong, 2004) of how Chinese learners actually value active and reflective thinking, deep understanding and the spirit of inquiry, but their active reflection may not be recognised when judged against Western criteria. Watkins and Biggs, (1996, 2001) and many other researchers point out the misunderstanding of Chinese students' learning approach and that Chinese students are as competent as local students. Not only are they able to make flexible adaptation to their new learning environments, they also express the willingness to do so (Cross and Hitchcock, 2007; Rastall, 2006; Volet and Renshaw, 1996).

Researchers depicting Chinese students either as passive and rote learners or active adaptors are taking a deterministic view – they see Chinese students as a generic group, with certain features determined by their broad cultural background, which is quite often attributed to the influence of Confucianism (Shi, 2006). They also tend to place the educational beliefs and practices in the West and East in contrasting positions. In fact, both the teachers and students from the West or East are highly diverse individuals from different families and educational backgrounds with different

strengths, motivations, aims and preferences. Therefore, when coming together in the UK HE, students and teachers are not completely holding a contrasting "East versus West" position, instead, with different expectations, preferences and reactions to the environment, they are more likely to construct dynamic local culture(s) in which the learning takes place. Therefore, I would like to introduce the concept of small cultures in the following section, which may provide a more nuanced perspective on students' transition experiences.

2.5.4 Small cultures

In this chapter, I make a considerable number of comparisons across cultures in the West and East where I suggest that a majority of the population from a particular cultural background have certain tendencies and preferences in terms of their conceptions of, and actions in, teaching and learning. In doing this, I attempt to explain small conflicts in the daily life in UK HE, such as the mismatching of expectations between Western teachers and Chinese students during classroom activities. However, the differences between the West and East are not consistently conveyed by any individual Western teacher or Chinese student in a 'typical' fashion due to the considerable diversity of perspectives within these larger cultures.

China is a big country comprised of 34 provincial-level administrative units, 56 ethnic groups, with different languages, dialects, customs, cuisines, and religions. Due to regional disparities in economic development, educational resources are distributed unevenly in different regions (Cai and Wu, 2019) and even more between rural and urban areas (Guo et al., 2013). Furthermore, as mentioned in 2.5.2, the highly diversified regional cultures also result in different conceptions of education and diverse implementation and localisation of the "quality education" initiative. Beyond

this, the education of ethnic minority groups in some of the regions are also known to be different from the Han-dominated regions (Lin, 2016). A series of policies have been implemented to promote the "harmonious multiculturalism" in the Chinese society, for example the specially designed class for the fusion of different cultures, bilingual or trilingual education and extra opportunities for minority students to enter HE (Leibold and Chen, 2013). However, Lin (2008) argues that the Han-chauvinist policy and attitudes have caused nation-wide cultural exclusion where the minority cultures are largely considered subordinate and recognised as useless for the modernisation of the nation. This has largely contributed to the low performance and mobility of students from minorities, such as Tibetans, Mongolians, and Turkic Muslims.

In addition, the educational practices in China are changing due to the impact of globalisation (Guo et al., 2013). There is an increasing number of returners joining educational institutes after their studies abroad; and the traditional educational approaches have been adjusted to increase practices of critical thinking, group discussion and being an independent learner (Jin and Cortazzi, 2006; Lei and Khan, 2012; Shi, 2006). In addition to this, Chinese students studying abroad are usually from relatively wealthy families, and have had access to plenty of resources from the Western culture such as having classes with a native speaker to create an English learning environment. Some of them will have experienced studying abroad before, as an exchange student for example. Their parents are also likely to be well educated and to hold international perspectives – they recognise the value for their children to have the experience of studying and living abroad, and they could afford the tuition and living fees. This means Chinese students enrolled in the master's programme bring 'small culture' residues (Holliday, 1999) from different family, educational, classroom, pedagogical and peer experience.

On the other hand, many teachers in Western universities have experience of interacting with Chinese students to some extent; some may have years of experience and have had close relationships. This means teachers are far from being ignorant of the situation and the behaviour tendency of their students. There are also institutes at universities to support teachers with less experience or insufficient tools for facing intercultural situations. Furthermore, universities have become increasingly internationalised, which means the ethnicity and nationality of both the staff and students are highly diversified. For example, a number of teachers at the university where this study was carried out, are not from Western countries. This means that the cultures of the stakeholders who feature in this study cannot be sharply divided between West and East. Instead, we could see the Chinese students and their teachers as in numerous intercultural groups.

Holliday (1999) provides us with a more specific perspective called “small cultures” to represent an intercultural group like this. Small cultures are shaped by the different cultures in the learning community with no prescriptive or normative features. Neither are they straightforwardly subordinate to any ‘large’ cultures as small cultures exist between as well as within large cultures. “ [A] small culture is... a dynamic, ongoing group process which operates in changing circumstances to enable group members to make sense of and operate meaningfully within those circumstances.” (p. 248) On this theme, Goodenough (1994) has written of how:

> I have found it theoretically helpful to think of both culture and language as rooted in human activities (rather than in societies) and as pertaining to groups. [. . .] There is a different culture of the activity for each set of role performers. These differences form a part of the cultural makeup of the overall group of people who perform the activity, but there is no one culture of that activity for the group as a whole, one that all its members share. [. . .] The cultural makeup of a society is thus to be seen not as a monolithic entity determining the behaviour of its members, but a melange of understandings and expectations regarding a variety of

> activities that serve as guides to their conduct and interpretation. (Goodenough, 1994, p. 266-7)

A large culture, compared to a small culture, approach tends to take an essentialist and normative perspective to describe and analyse a cultural group in terms of common features (Holliday, 1999). The way it "prescribes" suggestions and solutions in HE empowers the institutions and educators in the British setting and tends to define as a "reduced Other" (Grimshaw, 2007, p. 300) those who are less familiar with the culture of learning in UK HE. However, British students, as a matter of fact, also need to make adjustments during their transition from school to university (Shan and Daw, forthcoming). Furthermore, thinking in terms of a large culture can also backfire when learners from outside the culture take the stereotype as a defensive mechanism: "This is how we Chinese behave; that's all there is to it" (Tian and Lowe, 2013, p. 582). The way in which 'culturism' can deny individuals agency is captured succinctly in the following quotation from Holliday:

> If we think of a people's behaviour as defined and constrained by the culture in which they live, agency is transferred away from the individual to the culture itself, so that we begin to think that 'German culture believes that …', and that 'she belongs to German culture, therefore she …'. There is only a short, easy distance from this essentialist way of thinking to the chauvinistic stereotyping inherent in culturism which allows us to arrive at statements like 'in Middle Eastern culture there is no concept of individualized critical thinking'. (Holliday, 2005, p. 18)

The concept of "small cultures" is also in accordance with the "shifted figured worlds" discussed in 2.4.2 (see Figure 3), where I argued that the Chinese international students' identities shifted contextually according to the perceived environment co-constructed with the peers, staff and (academic) cultures they are exposed to in the UK HE.

2.6 Understanding Chinese Students

While the small culture perspective is more nuanced and valuable for understanding Chinese learners' transitions, it is still important to consider the big culture traditions which may contribute to how particular small cultures are constituted. Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) is prevalent in many Asian countries for example, Japan, Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, as Confucianism and ancient Chinese culture had a profound influence on these countries' long history. However, CHC does not only refer to Confucianism, as the tradition was influenced by Buddhism and Taoism (Jin and Cortazzi, 2006). I adopt the term CHC to refer to the commonly shared experiences of the teachers and students living in these regions.

Although I prefer not to take a culturalist view, I will have to discuss the dominant cultures of learning in the West and East in order to develop an understanding of the tendencies of expectations and behaviours of teachers and students from different cultural backgrounds that may contribute to relevant small cultures.

> A culture of learning frames what teachers and students expect to happen in classrooms and how participants interpret the format of classroom instruction, the language of teaching and learning, and how interaction should be accomplished as part of the social construction of an educational discourse system. (Jin and Cortazzi, 2006, p.9)

However, when comparing different cultures of learning in the West and East, we need to always bear in mind that the two cultures do not have clear boundaries and are not in neatly positions. In addition, each individual has their preferences and choices so will react differently to the cultures they are exposed to. Therefore, when talking about differences between cultures, I am not assuming that West and East form two separate culture groups with no overlap, no middle ground or no exceptions. I will refer to the

East sometimes as Chinese or Confucian Heritage Countries (CHC) for the main subjects of my study are Chinese students from mainland China, who have experienced, though do not completely belong to, these cultural categories. These terms may represent Chinese students more appropriately and inclusively given their family and educational background. When developing my discussion around the misunderstandings about Chinese students and the explanation of their behaviours, I will also include factors outside learning cultures, such as language barriers and the common issues of internationalisation. After all, people from different cultures will have different ways of thinking and beliefs, so will inevitably have disagreements.

2.6.1 Teachers as authorities

CHC teachers have had a long history of considering themselves as acting as a sage to the students. Right up to the present, students still hold high expectations of their teachers: as experts of knowledge and skills; as authoritative figures who have executive power over them; and as holding impeccable moral standards. (Jin and Cortazzi, 2006; Turner, 2006) Participants in a study by Nguyen et al., (2006) expressed that the common expectation on the teachers was that the teachers should be able to give the right answers to all the students' questions. Therefore, in students' minds, teachers are the authority in both academia and the school life, and students are obliged to obey their authority and avoid any disagreement, especially in the public.

The CHC tradition values "obedience, proper conduct, moral training, and the acceptance of social obligations, in contrast to the lack of emphasis placed on independence, assertiveness, and creativity" (Ho, 1986, p. 35-6).

Authority may sometimes have different implications in Western and CHC contexts:

> …Western concepts of authority are set against the background of the Western concept of the free, autonomous individual whereas Asian concepts of authority are set within a context of the part-whole relations of Confucian thought. When a Westerner views Confucian or Post-Confucian authority structures, all that is seen is the restriction on the freedom of choice of the individuals. An Asian looking at the same phenomenon is more apt to focus on the responsibility of the person in the position of authority to look after the interests of the one or ones over which the person's authority applies. The Asian focuses on the care, nurture, and benevolence (or their absence) of the person in authority while the Westerner tends to focus on the restriction, limitations, and dependence of the person over which the authority is exercised. An Asian tends to acknowledge the pervasive hierarchical relations in sociality… while the Westerner tends to deny one's own authority over others at the same time as feeling the restrictions of authority over oneself. (Scollon, R and Scollon, S. W., 1994, p.21 cited in Ho, 2001, p.106-7)

The distinction may not apply to all Westerners and Asians, but it may provide a lens to understand some of the difficulties a Western teacher and a Chinese student may encounter in their interactions. When the teacher is offering her/his opinions and suggestion, s/he may naturally hold back to avoid the impression of trying to restrict the student's freedom of making decisions, while the Chinese student may expect the teacher to play the role as an authority to tend to the student's interest and tell her/him what to do. The different understanding of authority also reinstates the culture and power discourses I discussed previously. High power distance societies tend to value social hierarchies and require all the social members to maintain the power of the authority and government by performing properly in their assigned roles, at the expenses of individual freedom of making choices; whilst in societies that are low on power distance, individuals are more respected and appreciated for what they are capable of (Joy and Kolb, 2009).

2.6.2 Curriculum and Pedagogy

HE academic practices in the UK, such as seminars, workshops and tutorials, and the norms governing them are sometimes not easy to challenge. By participating, both students and lecturers are expected to follow certain unexamined protocols assumed as normatively appropriate in these specific teaching and learning activities (Mann, 2005). Therefore, for some of the students, they need to embrace a new standard of being a good student (Durkin, 2008). Student-centred pedagogies, for example, encourage learners to learn through active engagement, most typically via discussions (Jin & Cortazzi, 1995, p.6), which tends to problematise the students who are not verbally engaged in learning (Grimshaw, 2007).

In addition, CHC students are perhaps more likely to see publications and textbooks as authorities and take what they absorb from the authorities as absolute truth. Knowledge is not to be challenged but to be gained, therefore, teaching and learning should both focus on how to reproduce the learning materials efficiently (Kember, 1997). However, in the new learning environment, students need to "move on from this position to one where they recognize multiplicity of viewpoints, uncertainty and relativism and finally reach the stage where they make reflective judgements through problem-solving enquiry, based on contextual evidence" (Durkin, 2008, p.18).

Furthermore, the construction of knowledge requires agreement, decision-making, response to different perspectives, and testing what is learned in application. This means student-centred education is premised on individual autonomy, which affirms and encourages independence. However, as discussed in 2.4.3, the existence and enhancement of autonomy is not always culturally appropriate. In other words, for Chinese students, the prevalently adopted concepts, grounded in the Western culture and values, such as co-constructing knowledge, autonomous learning and student-centred learning,, may not always be apposite (Nguyen et al., 2006; Walker and

Dimmock, 2000).

2.6.3 Assessment

Edwards et al. (2007) point out there are mismatches in learning strategies due to the different assessment methods in China and in Western universities. In their study, some of the participants believed the previous learning was towards "how to get high marks at the test" (p. 391), however extra skills were needed in the British academic context, such as critical thinking, forming arguments and essay writing. In Chinese schools, assessments tend to place a significant emphasis on memory-based, rather than task-based, methods. This means that students who have revised all the core materials carefully and can understand and remember the gist of the information, should be able to do well in the exams. Thus, assessment results can directly reflect the students' efforts. Whereas in the UK HE, task-based assessments, such as essays and presentations, are commonly used but the result does not always reflect how much a student has learned, rather it is how much s/he is able to understand and present in the assessment. Therefore, students may be very frustrated if they have put in a lot of effort by reading a huge amount, as required by the course, but fail to process what they have read with deep understanding or to present their ideas in a critical way in the essay, resulting in a lower grade than expected.

Some may argue that the above-mentioned phenomenon is also true for many British school pupils who may experience similar challenges in the transition to the university. However, a less satisfying academic performance may be more unacceptable for Chinese students who entered UK master's programmes with high expectations for the results of their learning. This also results from the mind-set of many Chinese students that a high assessment result is the only testimony of their efforts, ability and

appropriate methods in learning, and the most important way to define their value.

For many Chinese pupils, the only and most important life purpose before they become adults is to achieve high scores in the nation-wide university entry examination (gaokao). The examination is carried out once a year and the scores achieved in most of the cases are the only determinant of admission to higher education (Ding and Lehrer, 2007). There is another similar entry exam to select students with the best academic performance to enter higher-ranked high schools (equivalent to schools/colleges to prepare for A-levels or Scottish Highers) which are believed to prepare the students significantly better for gaokao (Liu et al., 2015). Within each county, the ranks of each high school and secondary school are common knowledge to the population (Ding and Lehrer, 2007) and students are under a lot of pressure to enter a higher-ranked school and university which seemingly promise a better future. As a consequence, stakeholders such as school policy makers, teachers, students and even parents spare no efforts to maximise scores attained in these exams (Liu et al., 2015).

In order to motivate school pupils, assessment results in mid-term, final term and mock entrance exams are often ranked and publicised in schools, accessible to all students and parents. This puts students under a huge amount of both learning and social pressure – the scores become the most important value of a student, outweighing any other qualities (Kirkpatrick and Zang, 2011). Therefore, students who grow up in such an academic ranking system throughout their educational experience are accustomed to openly comparing and competing with their peers and building their self-esteem on the scores they obtain. Furthermore, the competitive learning environment, where high grades are the only way to evaluate a student, will tend to promote surface and rote learning, discouraging students from investing their efforts in critical thinking and processing knowledge more deeply (Clark and Gieve, 2006). For example, a study

carried out by Salili and Lai (2003) in a Hong Kong Chinese and English medium secondary school indicated that students were likely to use memorisation as their learning strategy to get through the exams.

This large-scale exam also acts as a guidance for educational practices in secondary and high schools, with the result that teaching and learning activities are highly assessment-oriented, achieved efficiently by repetition and a large amount of practice. This is another reason why student-centred learning is often resisted in China's education practices – its teaching and learning approach is not always compatible with the dominating nation-wide assessment system, in which the single correct answer is expected (Tan, 2017; Wu and Qian, 2008). Students may find polishing their exam skills more helpful than developing critical thinking skills in terms of improving their academic achievement, i.e in this context assessment scores. This backfires when they encounter the UK HE assessment.

However, the extent to which school performance is valued also varies between regions. For example, some of the highly urbanised coastal cities tend to value the abilities to make profits rather than education because students can also have a good life without a degree from a highly ranked university. Traditional regional cultures can also affect how people accept or resist the implement of "quality education" and its related curriculum and pedagogy.

2.6.4 Collaborative learning

CHC students are from collectivist societies, where group values are often emphasised and individuals tend to be expected to make contributions to the collective aim, even at the expense of their own interests, as I argued in 2.3. However, this does not

automatically lead to a preference for group work or effective peer collaboration. Collaborative learning, such as group discussion, presentation, and assignment, requires each individual to input their effort, during which there is a shared leadership within the group in order to achieve the best outcome (Johnson and Johnson, 1994). In contrast, CHC cultures believe societies are based on unequal relationships – members maintain a clear hierarchy for the sake of stability. The teacher is the leader of a CHC classroom, and thereafter, a student should be the leader of a group in the absence of the teacher (Nguyen et al., 2006). Students who hold such a mind-set are under pressure to adapt, according to the study Lei and Khan (2012) did at an Higher Education Institution in England. They reported challenges such as communication barriers from different ways of thinking and language obstacles. However, the study also showed that these Asian students, even though new to this learning strategy, preferred to be involved in a cross-cultural group for their collaborative learning activities rather than a mono-cultural group, for they soon learnt the value of collaborative learning and found the experience enjoyable when working with peers with different opinions and ways of thinking from different cultures. Bearing in mind that Chinese students are likely to be accustomed to directly competing and comparing with each other rather than working with one another as a group (as discussed in 2.6.3), a variety of support should be provided as well as time for practice in order to help them build up the skills needed for communication and collaboration.

2.6.5 Language obstacles and anxiety

There is a debate around whether non-native English speakers should be treated in the same ways as native speakers in the English learning environment. In fact, students and teachers may have different perspectives on whether the language barrier has unnecessarily disadvantaged this cohort of students and whether western universities

should accommodate the students' needs.

Distress among international students related to language obstacles is often reported (Edwards et al., 2007). For example, the conversion of their thoughts between the mother language and English can cause slow reactions and numerous possibilities for misunderstanding. Jin and Cortazzi (2006) have tried to raise educators' awareness of L2 students' anxiety when they are expected to make spontaneous contributions to interactive classroom activities, such as group discussions and presentations. The anxiety may be attributed to more than the fear of losing face when making a mistake – incompetence in English may silence them even further and thereby hinder their participation.

L2 students need to reach a minimum level of IELTS or TOFEL to be able to enrol in a master's programme in the UK. The requirement of most of the UK universities is 6.5 – 7.5. I was once an IELTS teacher in China and have trained numerous students to reach their target in order to study abroad. Students hold themselves in high regard when they reach the threshold score, but there is a huge gap between the academic English level needed to reach the score and that needed for actual study in UK HE (Edwards et al., 2007).

However, L2 learners are not the only group that struggle with academic English writing. A comparative study carried out by Leedham (2014) between Chinese and British students entering UK undergraduate study shows that neither of the cohorts felt prepared for writing at tertiary-level. Chinese students reported that they had very limited exposure to English academic writing courses or practices in either their previous study in China or undergraduate study in the UK. Surprisingly British students reported the same situation. Both the cohorts felt they had to take a "trial and error"

approach (p.5) – learning from mistakes, which again places our attention on the effectiveness of teachers' feedback. Students in their third year, both L1 and L2, reported huge stress due to uncertainty and lack of confidence concerning the essays they could produce.

Furthermore, studies also show that Chinese students, due to their mother language, demonstrate certain tendencies in English writing. A study by Mayor (2006) highlighted that Chinese students' writings, compared to those of Greek students, convey a hortatory tone for English speakers, , as a result of their significantly greater usage of interrogatives, imperatives and other grammatical devices. In another study of the students' writing assignments between 2000 and 2008 in UK undergraduate institutes, Chinese students had a high preference for using particular connectors and first-person pronouns, compared to their British counterparts. However, the difference became less apparent in year 3 compared to years 1 and 2, suggesting that students gradually adapted to the expected academic writing style in HE. (Leedham, 2011)

2.6.6 Independent learning

Grimshaw (2007) portrays Chinese students as being diligent and committed to their studies at a Chinese university, where students demonstrated a considerable degree of autonomy in terms of self-study, therefore, Grimshaw argues against the stereotype of Chinese students being passive and teacher-dependent. However, I think we need to revisit the definition of learner autonomy or rather what it means to teachers and students in the West and East.

It is clear from the preceding discussion, that students in the CHC and Western learning cultures often have access to different educational practices, such as pedagogy and

assessment methods, due to different beliefs concerning teaching and learning. Therefore, although students in the West and East both understand they are expected to be independent learners, they tend to adopt different learning strategies and thereby demonstrate different ways of being independent. CHC students, thereafter, are sometimes considered as passive/rote learners from a Western perspective.

Independent learning for CHC students also has a different definition from that in the West; and Jin's and Cortazzi's (2006) study brings out this difference clearly. They found that it was broadly accepted among CHC students that they themselves should take responsibility to learn individually through reading, memorising and repeatedly practising. Whereas, when they showed these CHC learning strategies to Western students who are more used to learning with peers through discussion, the Western students believed that it was impossible to use these CHC learning strategies on a daily basis. If we take the perspective from the CHC standard, from what they believe to be an independent learner and how they should “behave” in the classroom, we may portrait their Western counterparts as lazy and noisy students with little self-discipline for the following reasons: these students “disrespect” their teachers by challenging them in public and by not giving them the “privilege” of being a teacher; students do not repeatedly revise their textbooks and lecture notes enough to memorise them; students violate the disciplines of a classroom by “talking” loudly and freely.

Therefore, it is meaningless to argue for Chinese students being passive or active, independent or dependent, rote learners or deep learners without fully understanding the definitions of these terms in different cultures of learning. In order to construct a desirable small culture in a classroom, a programme or a school within UK HE institutions, stakeholders, i.e. students and teachers from different countries, should acknowledge and embrace the different standards each individual holds to be a good

student and a good teacher as the foundation to build on.

In conclusion, the academic skills required in UK higher education, such as critical thinking, academic writing, independent learning, classroom engagement, and time-management are an essential and challenging part of the transition from school to university for not only Chinese students studying in the UK, but also students who grew up in the UK education system (Durkin, 2008; Shan et al., forthcoming). It is a demanding process for every student, therefore, if we could give more understanding to Chinese students' mind sets and the skills they are equipped with before they step into the new learning environment, we might have more empathy with them and be less inclined to label them as passive/rote learners.

2.7 Intercultural adaptation: choices and challenges

Intercultural adaptation is essentially a process of learning and integration into not only an "alien" society, but also a "foreign academic culture" (Gu and Maley, 2008, p.236). As Lewthwaite (1997) observes in his literature review in this field: "typically an international student is on a step by step psychological journey from the periphery of a culture to the centre, from a state of ignorance and resentment to a position of understanding and empathy" (p.169). In the experiential learning process, Chinese learners gain concrete experience and engage in active reflection, resulting in abstract conceptualisation and then more experiments to practise new understandings (Kolb, 1983, cited in Jackson, 2015). Therefore, they are likely to broaden themselves through the formal intercultural education accompanied by the experience abroad. According to Mezirow's (1991a, 1991b) transformative learning theory, critical reflective thinking is a crucial trigger of personal transformation in the process of adapting into a new learning environment. "In this reiterative learning process, new or revised interpretations of the

meaning of one's experience can bring about deeper understandings of intercultural interactions and more awareness of Self and Other" (Jackson, 2015, p.93).

However, the adaptation can be full of struggles and the rediscovered self, based on the new values and standards, may be disappointing. If a student holding a learner identity as a good student in her/his home country can no longer remain at the same level among peers, or if a student finds her/his learning/life coping techniques no longer effective in the new environment, it can be devastating to face all the challenges alone in an "alien" society. Furthermore, language obstacles are another common issue in intercultural adaptation. For example, during reading, students may find it difficult to find the main points in a document as they may need to read sentence-by-sentence only to understand the texts. In a lecture, students may be unable to grasp the key concepts, thus they have to copy from a blackboard or a PowerPoint projection. All information has to be processed sentence-by-sentence first, with an attempt to comprehend each component part. These factors may allow students little time to reflect on what they have learned, instead, they may spend most of the time struggling to follow what they can understand.

"While general acculturation is taking place at the group level, individuals have variable degrees of participation … and variable goals to achieve from the contact situation." (Berry, 2005, p. 702) Not every individual student entering a new learning environment has a similar experience, perceives the experience in the same way or chooses to make the adaptation in the same fashion. As a matter of fact, the HE environment students in my study experienced was far from a British or Scottish environment, rather, it is more of an international environment. Especially at the School of Education, where the vast majority of postgraduate students were Chinese, many students reported they barely had the chance to make contact with a non-Chinese student during classroom activities.

Soon after the beginning of the semester, students in the UK realise it is not a short-term adjustment that they need to make. They may choose to make adaptations ranging from adjusting to a new pedagogy, adopting different learning methods to trying out new identities and achieving a degree of acculturation. Having argued that, it does not mean that the process has a clear path and instructions to follow leading to what they choose to become. In reality, it is more of a chaos, for one may not know one's capacity and true preferences until you encounter the actual experience.

The integration occurs when individuals are willing to seek relationships and interactions with other cultures, while they maintain their own cultural identities. That is to say, the newcomer's attitude towards the new culture defines cultural integration and the acculturation strategies adopted. However, the extent and the strategies of cultural integration are not always determined freely by individuals according to their interests or needs, if the dominant society is less open and inclusive to the newcomers. (Berry, 2005)

The innovative aspect of Berry's framework is that he acknowledges individuals', as well as non-dominant groups' willingness to maintain their own cultural identities and heritage and to seek interaction with the dominant culture. This willingness, though to certain extent constrained by the dominant culture, has a critical impact on the intercultural transition, psychologically and socioculturally. Berry's framework has provided a multi-dimensional account of diverse experiences of acculturation, which was often traditionally described as a one-way path with non-dominant groups and individuals moving towards assimilation and adaptation to the dominant society. This can also help us understand the various stresses in the process and develop strategies to support the transition. For example, cultural conflicts may be resolved in different ways

for those who are seeking integration as opposed to those who are seeking separation. In the HE learning environment in the UK, multiple viewpoints and relativistic perspectives commonly exist, oral and written debates are encouraged, and teachers no longer (can) answer all the questions. Students entering the new realm also need to develop their tolerance of the insecurity stemming from the uncertainty in learning. Although intercultural experience is proved to be beneficial and can increase intercultural competence, it can cause distress for people who are not adventurous.

Knowing these factors, we have lots of questions to explore as an educator. Shall we intervene if our students are willing to seek separation and marginalisation? How do we give students enough support in the long-term if they choose assimilation but are potentially jeopardised when they re-enter their own culture? Or going even further: should the UK HE context change more to being more global and inclusive?

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed the key concepts in the literature in terms of learner identity and autonomy which has originated from Western cultures and values. It also attempts to provide explanations on how the concept of learner autonomy may be problematic when applied to Chinese students due to their different cultural background and previous learning experiences. The mismatching expectations and confusions during the Chinese students' integration into the UK HE system may be just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to considering all of the differences between the West and East. However, it is possible to achieve a smooth transition if both parties take efforts to develop mutual understandings. Furthermore, I have also discussed how Chinese students' learner identities may also be affected during transitions, with the progressive perceptions and acceptance of the new environment in the UK and the gradual

detachment of the affinity to Chinese society and their previous values.

In the next chapter, 'Methodology', I will explain why the chosen research method fits in with my research interest in learner identity and autonomy. I will also lead into the research questions of this thesis and how they have developed after the pilot study.

Chapter 3 Methodology

This chapter describes the methodology for the research. I will first give an overall introduction to the research project and list the two main research questions along with the two additional research questions based on the findings of the pilot study. Then I will explain how the pilot study reshaped the research questions, improved the research design, and polished my recruitment techniques and interviewing skills. I will then discuss how I see participants as agents, the potential problem of voice given in the interviews, and the rationale for choosing the longitudinal case study, which provided insights into the research design. In the data collection section, I will discuss in detail what happened during the data collection, how I conducted interviews and why I see myself as an active interviewer. I will also explain how I designed the interview questions according to the research questions. In the section on data analysis, I will illustrate why I see thematic narrative analysis as appropriate to my research and will demonstrate the steps I used in the analysis process. In the last sections of this chapter, I will reflect on my position as a researcher and also discuss the ethical considerations of the research.

3.1 Research overview and research questions

As a Chinese international postgraduate student in the UK, I have a passion for studying the transition process of myself and other Chinese international students into UK learning environments, where the ability of independent learning is expected and critical reflection during learning is required. I am particularly interested in how learner identities are influenced during the transition through the personal experience and how the students make meaning of their transitions. The results of the research are intended to contribute to a better understanding of Chinese learners in the teaching

and learning process in the higher education institutions in the UK.

This study used narrative inquiry which captures personal experiences over time and how individuals interact with the sociocultural environment (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). It was carried out in a Russell Group University in Scotland with a high proportion of international students. In the UK, the majority of the taught master's programmes take one year from the second half of September to the end of August, including three semesters with the first two (September to April) for teaching and the third (May to August) for the dissertation. International students whose first language is not English are required to take an English test such as IELTS and TOFEL and they need to pass a certain level to enter the universities. For those whose test results are slightly below the required level, each university provides an option for their conditional offer holders – an EAP (English for Academic Purposes) course on campus for up to six months before the beginning of the academic year. Passing the EAP final assessment can then secure a place in the upcoming master's programme. Therefore, for some of the participants in this research, the study period is 12 + 6 months.

This study followed 19 Chinese master's students studying in Education, Engineering and Science programmes for more than a whole academic year, from the beginning of the EAP (English for Academic Purposes) courses to the end of the dissertation. Each participant was interviewed 3 times in order to explore their individual transition experiences and learner identities in different stages of their studies.

The research aimed to investigate the following overarching questions by conducting qualitative research:

1. In what ways do Chinese students feel able to be autonomous in their master's

studies? Does this change over time?

2. How do UK teaching, learning and assessment practices affect their identities as learners?

On the basis of the pilot study, discussed below, the following research questions were added:

3. Are there examples of ways in which the differences between UK and China have reduced in terms of teaching, learning and assessment from the experience of the research participants?

4. To what extent do the research participants feel it has been necessary to adjust how they approach their learning to suit the UK context and how does this adjustment relate to their identities and autonomy as learners?

3.2 Pilot study

With approval from the Moray House School of Education Ethics Committee, I started to conduct my pilot study at the Business School of the target university from October 2015, which was towards the end of the first year of my PhD study. In the pilot study, I planned to interview each participant twice: the first interview was conducted in October 2015, the second one in March 2016. The two rounds of interviews were aiming to follow up the participants' transition experience process and potentially compare the students' learner identity, motivation and adaptation techniques and investigate if any changes had occurred during their studies. In the meantime, I also polished my interview questions, practised interviewing skills and recruiting

approaches, and progressed the research method design.

3.2.1 Findings of the pilot study

Eventually I was able to find two Chinese female master's students from the Business School. Through the first individual interviews with them, the findings were interestingly conflicting with the research findings in the papers that were published in the last 20 years. Instead of expressing the "learning shock" (Griffiths et al., 2005) in the new learning environment, the participants appeared to be very calm because they did not feel that the new learning environment was so different from their previous ones, mainly regarding classroom activities and assessment methods.

Researcher:	Do you feel anything different about the assessment between your previous learning experiences and now?
Yvonne:	I feel they are quite similar. At my university, during my undergraduate study, teachers were obviously imitating the methods of assessment used here. We also did group work, presentations etc. So I'm basically used to being assessed like this.
Researcher:	Do you need to make any adjustment to approach the assessments here?
Yvonne:	Generally not, I feel they are quite similar, at least so far.
Researcher:	Do you feel you need to react differently in the class compared with your previous learning experience?
Yvonne:	Not really. I remain basically the same. The biggest obstacle is still the language.
	(Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

The other participant had similar impressions, only pointing out that the classroom discussion appeared to be more frequent compared to her previous learning experience in China, and the deadlines of the assignments were given at the beginning of the semester, leaving students much more time to manage, resulting in a greater

challenge to their self-control. I also had some informal conversations with four Chinese master's students individually from the School of Education at the same university, and posed similar questions in the workshops I had organised to support the transition of Chinese international master's students at the school I was studying in. The majority of these students expressed that they did not feel the current learning experience was so new either. Perhaps the pedagogy in China has changed over time, especially where many previous overseas students have returned and become educators in higher education institutions. Therefore, students are now less likely to feel they are entering an alien environment, instead, some of them have quite accurately expressed their insights of how they understand the UK learning environment to be.

Researcher:	Have you noticed any differences in terms of course requirements or expectations placed on the students?
Yvonne:	I don't think the difference manifests itself just in the teaching and learning system between UK and China, rather it's the different requirements for undergraduate and for postgraduate students. Our school always emphasises that this is postgraduate study, so that we are expected to be more independent learners, and we need to be critical in thinking, writing and reading. Therefore, I don't feel the challenge is about the transition from China to UK, but about the transition from undergraduate study to postgraduate study.
	(Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

3.2.2 The evolution of the research method and research questions

I encountered some difficulties when recruiting participants in the Business School; not in getting students' interest in the topic, but in getting them to finally participate in the research. I tried to approach students in the café of the Business School but received only refusals; I also asked lecturers and tutors from the Business School to help me

recruit students by sending group emails, but there was no response. I then tried to speak to students during the lecture break and managed to get 6 Chinese students to give me their email addresses, but they never responded to my emails. However, the trial of various methods of recruitment provided me with valuable information and experience.

First of all, I realised how difficult it can be to recruit a complete stranger as a participant, but once I become an acquaintance, everything becomes easier. I met my first participant from the workshop I organised, and then she asked one of her flatmates to help. They both made a great effort to provide all the information I needed during the interviews. Another interesting incident happened when I was approaching the potential participant groups in a classroom. I introduced myself and the research project to 6 students, who, from the way they sat and behaved, were apparently two groups. They expressed they preferred to be interviewed in a small group rather than individually. When I asked them to write down their email addresses for me one by one, one of the male students said it's not necessary to give me his email address as he could just find out the information from his peers and they would attend the interview together if they decided to be recruited.

This abovementioned phenomenon reminded me of the collectivistic nature of Chinese society. I realised that the transition of Chinese students' identities may not always be individual. There may be collective transitions as well if they manage to establish a nice and warm social group and develop their identities within it. Therefore, in the main study, I developed the research methods in terms of sampling and data collection approach, which will be listed in the Sampling section.

More importantly, as the data I collected from the pilot study revealed that the

differences between the two countries were becoming largely reduced. I decided to reshape the research questions by adding the third and fourth questions, in order to explore if the pilot study findings are still the case in a larger sample and if so, whether the reduction of the differences may affect students' learning experiences.

3.3 Agency and Voice

3.3.1 Participants as agents

Taking Hartas's (2010) view, "social inquiry should start with agents' own pretheoretical knowledge and self-understandings to ensure pluralism in the perspectives offered" (p.45), participants in this study were considered to be agents constructing their identities through negotiation and interaction with their environment. Therefore, this research was designed to focus on how the participants made sense of their own experience, and how they exercised agency in learner autonomy, learner identity and the process of the transition. This is to say, the participants were given voice in the research, through which their learner identities are expressed, mainly through spoken language, as well as written text and body languages (Rée, 2000), because to the researcher, voice is associated with how the participants construe themselves and their experiences. Research interviews were adopted to enable participants to verbalise their current meanings to their experiences, then followed up with the shift of the meanings when it took place.

When designing interview questions and analysing the data, efforts were made to ensure that the participants' insights were thoroughly explored as individual cases and their voices were heard and presented as they were. However, it does not mean the

participants straightforwardly have a voice or are “being empowered” (Barnett & Di Napoli, 2008, p.6) due to the problem of voice.

3.3.2 The Problem of Voice

During the data collection in qualitative research, voice refers to the chances and even power given to the participants to stand up for their meanings. It is one of the solutions to the debated issues of researchers being inevitably biased or potentially incompetent to represent the participants, especially those who are minorities, marginalised or powerless (Holloway and Biley, 2011). However, Lather (2009) warned us that we should be cautious about our claims to give voice to the voiceless, as this can be an illusion. Researchers should avoid placing themselves in the position to grant the “voiceless” a chance to speak.

Thomson (2011) points out that “all ‘voice’/s is/are situated, particular and partial; this is particularly an issue for researchers who must be wary of privileging ‘voice’(s) over other forms of information and taking responses to questions as unwavering truth” (p.23). People’s behaviours are not always consistent: what they say to one person or on one occasion may not remain the same when they are speaking to another person or on another occasion. Their voices may be compromised due to some particular circumstances, for example, they may subconsciously try to impress the researcher, or provide what they think they might be expected to say, or they may be afraid of reprisal or being judged if they are honest. Or they may change their mind over time as the response to the new information and the constantly changing environment. Therefore, it is more sensible to treat the “voices” as a layer of people’s mind and opinions, rather than pure truth or a lie. Holloway and Biley (2011) also claim that voice is more than merely speaking. When other factors, such as silence during an interview, compose the

meaning, it is likely to be ignored or misinterpreted in the presentation of the data.

In addition, the problems of voice also emerge from the researcher's beliefs, values, preferences, and communication methods. All these factors largely affect what is being discussed during the interviews, and what data is interesting enough to be chosen and presented. It may never be the genuine voice of the participants. The researcher is at the steering wheel of the whole study towards a direction that is within the acceptable range. Therefore, when we are claiming the nature of the research is to give voice to the participants, we should never omit that the voice has been "processed" rather than being straightforwardly authentic.

However, the research is not solely composed of participants' voices, for identities are under continuous construction linked with personal meanings in the sociocultural context individuals live in. When making the voices, participants' voices are expressed under various stimuli during the interviews, where identities are depicted, verbalised, discussed, and needed to make meanings to both the interviewer and the interviewees, thus the interview is a collaborative formation of identities (Taylor, 2008), thereby the research data will be a mixture of both the participants' and the researcher's voices and agency.

3.4 Longitudinal case study research

3.4.1 Longitudinal study

Identity is largely based on human memories, and is mainly described by language. However, these two carriers are often ambiguous and change over time (Bakhurst,

2001; Bruner, 1990). I used longitudinal case studies to capture the potential changes during the participants' studies rather than only taking participants' one-time conclusions about their learning experience by the time they finish, because participants may present themselves as how they expect them to be or skip details of the process after they complete the adventure.

Therefore, the research was designed to interview the participants three times throughout the academic year, in order to compare their responses and coping techniques in the UK learning environment and how they made sense of the experience. In the meantime, the study might potentially identify whether there were any changes taking place during their studies and even the "turning-point experiences" (Denzin, 2001, p.34) that may have caused the transformation of their learner identities during the transitions. This may manifest as critical incidents and the influence of participants' teachers, peers or family members. These data were expected to reveal some provisional solutions and suggestions that may benefit both the educators and Chinese international students who will be going through the transitions.

3.4.2 Defining change

The three-time interviews are designed to capture and compare the potential change of each participant in terms of his/her motivation, study/life plan, expectations and attitudes towards teaching and teachers, and more importantly, what the participant values the most in his/her learning and the self-image of him/herself as a learner. However, change is not presumed in this research and I am aware that change is contextual to every individual case in this research, as Saldana (2003) suggests that a researcher should be flexible and prepared that the explicit definition of change may emerge in the process of the data collection and analysis.

In order to capture the potential differences and influences and to follow them up in the later interviews, I also reviewed carefully the previous interview accounts before the second and the last interviews, paying attention to any incidents, thoughts, difficulties, etc., mentioned previously. I raised relevant questions in the later interviews and sometimes challenged the participants when I spotted contradictions. I sometimes helped the participants conclude or interpret their experiences and always confirmed with them, which could be found in the finding chapters, as what matters is how they make sense of the occurrence of their experience and changes. However, I was cautious about my judgment based on my own values, sociocultural perspectives and research orientations, for my role in this research is to co-construct and interpret the data rather than creating and presenting what is already in my mind (Holmes, 1998, cited in Saldana 2003).

3.5 Data collection

3.5.1 Sampling

In order to have relatively extensive views from the Chinese international students while collecting a manageable amount of data, I planned to recruit 30 Chinese participants from a university in Scotland for the main study so that even a drop out of half the participants would still give me enough data. There were 15 from the School of Education and 15 from the School of Engineering for they both have Chinese international students as the majority of the students in their master's programmes. Moreover, I believed it would be interesting to have a general comparison of quite different disciplines and examine whether they may lead to distinctive learning

experience due to the different nature of the subjects. I changed my contact method from Email, used in the pilot study, to WeChat, an instant messenger prevalently used in China, in order to keep a better contact with the participants. It also made the individual contacts more personal and made me easier to approach.

The recruitment at School of Education was fairly easy. I broke the ice by introducing myself as a PhD student in Education and simply asked: "Could you do me a favour?" when talking to the student groups in their classrooms. I managed to begin the interviews from July 2016 when the participants were doing EAP (English for academic purposes) courses. I also went to the postgraduate student induction to promote my research project and introduce the series of workshops I created to support the international students' academic transition into UK HE. The workshop was held once a month for four months which gave me broader chances to recruit more participants and to maintain a good relationship with them. By October 2016, 15 participants had attended the first round of the interviews. Students were interested in my research as the topic was very closely connected to their lives; and I told them by participating in my research, they could have an early experience of conducting qualitative research which might benefit their dissertation project. I also provided information and suggestions for their study and lives in the UK and answered their questions whenever they contacted me.

However, at the School of Engineering, I encountered similar difficulties as in the pilot study during the recruitment: despite the support of the staff, Chinese students were generally not willing to spare the time for the interviews. The staff arranged for me to speak to 5 different groups of the students in their lectures or seminars, with 20 to 50 students each time, mostly Chinese students. Only 7 participants contacted me and eventually attended the interviews. Therefore, I had to ask my friends studying at this

university to help and they managed to find another 3 participants from Sciences programmes, which made up another 10 participants. This is also why the first round of the interviews with a few sciences and engineering students were as late as the middle of November 2016.

The research lasted until the end of the master's study towards the end of October 2017, when participants dropped from 25 to 19, 10 from School of Education and 9 from School of Science and Engineering. Fortunately, the majority of the participants were able to provide rich data during the interviews and some of them had fascinating transition experiences in both study and personal development.

3.5.2 Semi-structured in-depth interviews

As discussed previously, in order to understand how the participants perceived the process of their transition experiences and how this affected their learner identities, the research involved face-to-face semi-structured interviews as the data collection approach, aiming to gain deeper understanding via direct interactions with participants (Cousin, 2009).

By using semi structured interviews, the researcher can discuss meanings, experiences and perspectives with the participants, which can help in understanding their agency and identities. The researcher can also place focus on certain responses to confirm the meaning or explore further details during the interviews. In addition to this, the participants' facial expression, tone and body language can also contribute to a more precise understanding of what they mean in the moment, or the necessity to change to a new topic (Robson, 2011). In the case of this research, I also took advantage of my sensitivity to the interviewees' body languages and tones, responding and adjusing my

tone and questions accordingly. When I sensed that the participants were trying too hard to “do me a favour” and displayed anxiety for not offering me the explicit answers they supposed I might have needed, I stopped the conversation and emphasised again that I was simply interested in their personal experiences, but fully respected their right to only tell me what they felt comfortable talking about. During the interviews, I took notes of my observations and feelings during the interviews, in order to help me recall the detailed conversation context during transcriptions.

Furthermore, semi-structured interviews provide opportunities to probe the responses from the participants (Hobson and Townsend, 2010) in order to improvise during the interviews and ask further questions based on the answers provided. In addition, interviews are also the “bonding time” for the participants and researcher: through the exploration of the past and current situation of the participants, the researcher gradually earns the participants’ trust and establishes relationships through the conversations, which also helps to retain the participants in the following interviews.

However, the research interview is far from a neutral tool enabling the researcher to acquire information and determine the truth. When asking and answering questions, language as the communication medium has the unavoidable limitation in exchanging and interpreting views. Fontana and Frey (2000) point out that “the spoken or written word has always a residue of ambiguity, no matter how carefully we word the questions and how carefully we code and report the answers” (p.645). Therefore, the researchers’ position should also be problematised in representing and interpreting data, as the participants may be portrayed as how the researchers want them to be seen (Errante, 2000).

Furthermore, people have very different criteria when they try to describe their

impressions and feelings of their experiences, for the meaning of the words they use only indicates how they believe the words mean (Thomas, 2011). For example, when one student says that s/he understands how to be critical in academic writing and another one says that s/he feels concerned that s/he is not capable of performing her/his critical ability well in practice, they may actually have a very similar level of capability of how to be critical in reading and writing. In this study, I do not intend to compare among students, rather I would compare individual's attitudes, feelings and impressions.

3.5.3 Active interviewing

As the study focuses on the students' transition experiences and how these might affect their learner identities, I used narrative inquiry as the mechanism of this study for it could help "retain the complexity of the situation in which an action was undertaken and the emotional and motivation meaning connected with it" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.11). Through stories, discussions and meaning making, the participants and I made sense of their individual experiences and created narrative knowledge from their ambiguous and constantly shifting daily lives (Bruner, 1986). As the interviewer of the study, I took account of my position as a co-creator of the data rather than a discoverer, acknowledged and played an active role during the interaction with the participants because I believe in human sciences, "the researcher does not find narratives but instead participates in their creation" (Neander & Skott, 2006, p.297).

Therefore, unlike the traditional interviews, based on positivist paradigms, active interviewing or interactive interviewing was adopted in this research in order to encourage the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee and allow the co-construction of meaning during the data collection, because the interviewees are not

seen as the information vessels for the researchers to hunt for pure information (Ellis et al., 1997; Errante, 2000). The participants were also encouraged to shift positions in the interviews, thereby to enable different perspectives to make meanings. As Holstein and Gubrium (2003) argue, an active interviewer does not feed words to the interviewees, but rather "offers them pertinent ways of conceptualizing issues and making connections – that is, suggests possible horizons of meaning and narrative linkages that coalesce into the emerging responses"(p.15).

Interviews are more than mining information through conversations, because "meaning is not merely elicited by apt questioning nor simply transported through respondent replies; it is actively and communicatively assembled in the interview encounter" (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997, p.114). The interactions during the interviews in this study are regarded as part of the process for the participants to recognise, verbalise and display their agency and identity through the support and company of the researcher. The interview is a "dialogic" and "reflective journey", which creates a "third space" that allows the interviewer and the interviewee to co-construct meaning and develop understandings (Cousin, 2009, p.73). Furthermore, given that the research interview is seen as a dynamic and dialogic formulation of meaning, the researcher should not make any judgement or decisions unless the whole picture is revealed. Therefore, the research data was analysed over time with the three rounds of interviews going on; moreover, the case studies, made up of the transcripts and researcher's interpretations were sent to the individual participant so that "they can confirm the credibility of the information and narrative account" (Creswell and Miller, 2000, p.127).

3.5.4 Interview design and techniques

As the research questions focus on how the UK teaching, learning and assessment practices affect the Chinese international students' identities as learners, the interview questions were designed in three main themes: teaching, learning and assessment. In the meantime, teachers and peers who play important roles in the teaching and learning process were also discussed during the interviews. Furthermore, the research also looks at students' learner autonomy and identity, and if they vary over time. Thus, questions such as how they perceived themselves as a learner and what they valued the most in learning were repeated in each interview to collect and compare the individual responses by time sequence. In order to compare students' awareness and capacities of being autonomous in different stages, participants were asked whether they had encountered difficulties in learning, what support they had received and what they expect from the teachers' roles. Please see interview questions in the appendix.

The three interviews had different foci and therefore were chosen to the place at a specific time of the one-year study (see Table 3 for timetable). The first round of interviews was arranged when they first arrived in UK and started to have a taste of the master's or EAP (English for Academic Purposes) study – July to October 2016. They were excited and constantly found something new and even challenging. The second ones were conducted at the end of the second semester and Easter Holidays – April and May 2017. This was when they had experienced two semesters' teaching and assessments and may have accumulated certain point of views towards the new learning and living environment and have made some adjustment. The last ones happened after the students had submitted their dissertation/project – September and October 2017 – when they could present an overall description and reflection on their whole year study.

Individual	2016						2017									
Interviews	7	8	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1st																
2nd																
3rd																

Table 3 Data Collection Timetable

The first interview was aiming to understand the participants' personal background mainly including the previous experience of teaching, learning and assessment in their undergraduate study, the motivation to pursue a further degree in the UK and the expectations for their masters' studies. Moreover, because students were relatively new to the learning and living environment, it was the best time to ask whether they had noticed any differences since they arrived and how they felt. The majority of the participants from the School of Education were interviewed during the EAP course while the science and engineering students were recruited and interviewed after the beginning of the first semester, so they may have meant slightly differently when talking about their learning experience, as only some of them had studied at the language centre.

The second interview placed focus on adaptation: whether students noticed anything different from their expectations or previous experiences, and whether they had or planned to make adjustments. Furthermore, most of the participants were interviewed after the assessment of the second semester and having started to prepare for the dissertation, the interviews thus captured their transitions from taught students to research students, where the students manifested anxiety about the assessment results and about the upcoming research project due to inexperience. They also reported their negotiation with supervisors and new colleagues, the science and engineering students

especially mentioned how they adapted into a daily routine working in a laboratory with a more experienced group – PhD students or post-doctoral staff.

The third interview was designed to emphasise students' self-conclusion of the one-year study, and the comparisons of the different stages in terms of self-development and responses to the learning and living environment. They were given an open and confidential space to make meaning of their learning experience and were provided tools to facilitate the self-reflection, for example, some of the questions were repeated in each interview and the students were reminded of previous answers for comparison.

In addition, there was a special design feature during the interviews. I made forty cards with key words or phrases on each in both Mandarin and English, including: teachers, peers, practice, creativity, plenty of space and time, preparation, sense of achievement, grades, feedback, clear instruction, interest, comfortable zone, reading, encouragement, confidence, talent, self-control, motivation, target, stick to plans, strong will, patience, decision making, degree, career, family, not losing face, making voice, communication, critical thinking, and university. The participants were asked to pick 6-8 cards at the end of each interview and to sequence them in order to answer the question -- what do you value the most in learning? The phrases or words on the cards are mainly from the key words repeatedly mentioned in previous literatures about autonomy, learner identity, agency, teaching and learning in higher education, Chinese students' transitions in Western countries. They were tested in the pilot study and were adjusted and reduced to 40 cards. Each card could bear different meanings due to the language ambiguity: the words are brief and can be understood in many different ways according to various contexts. When participants were not sure of the meaning of them, I encouraged them to interpret the cards from their own perspectives, which could reflect even more deeply the meanings they made

individually. During the last interview after choosing and sequencing the cards, I presented the photo of the previous results from the first two interviews and assisted the interviewee to make meaning out of the comparisons, especially if there was any change in the choices or sequence of importance of the cards.

The use of the cards broadened the interview topics and acted as an effective stimulation for the interviewees to talk more and develop deeper understandings about themselves and their experiences. In addition, the cards presented a direct comparison across the three interviews that happened in different stages of their study, which could not only reveal the change but also enabled the self-reflection of the participants. In the last interview, they were asked to compare the three rankings they made and to interpret, if they could, why there were certain tendencies showing in the comparison. The method proved to be helpful in terms of encouraging the conversation, broadening the topics in the interviews and comparing the priorities of the participants in their learning over time. In the finding chapters, I will present a few examples of the card ranking comparisons and the interpretations given by the participants for the change in the priorities in their study and the change of their identities.

During the interviews, students could choose to speak English or Mandarin, or they could speak both, which in fact happened in most of the cases. The majority of the participants chose to speak Mandarin, two participants, both from the School of Education, Dora and Audrey, chose to speak English in the first interview. However, we did not stick with English to the end of the interview for we both found using our first language could achieve better communication. The interview recordings were later transcribed and translated, and the data were presented in English, which will be discussed in the data analysis section.

3.6 Data Analysis

The data analysis began as early as the beginning of the data collection in the summer of 2016 as I had tried to identify potential themes after each interview and noted down the features of the students' transitions in different stages and my thoughts. I used NVivo to organise the data and my notes, then created an increasing number of nodes after each interview. Furthermore, before the second and third rounds of interviews, I listened to previous recordings and read the field notes to decide if there were any incidents and thoughts that I wanted to follow up, which sometimes had become important data later. In fact, there was no specific time for data analysis because the data, from the very first interview, had become part of my daily thoughts and had "haunted" me ever since. There was more than a year of my PhD study that was all about data and participants.

If I were to summarise the process of the data analysis, it largely involved three different stages: choosing thematic narrative data analysis, transcription and data selection, node generation and development, during which numerous decisions were made with the help of my supervisors who not only walked me through some of the transcripts and data analysis, but also provided valuable suggestions on the writing of findings chapters. The three stages, although were presented in a straight timeline, they were more of a cyclical process, and sometimes more than one of them happened at the same time.

3.6.1 Choosing thematic narrative data analysis

After the data collection finished in October 2017, I started to transcribe and organise the interview recordings which was massive and chaotic as I had 19 participants with 3

interviews each and one interview usually lasted 1-1.5 hours. In the meantime, I had to make a decision in terms of data analysis methods as two different types of data analysis methods seemingly fit in my study – grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) and thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008). Grounded theory at the beginning seemed to make the analysis easier as it could help me break the massive data into segments, discovering commonality through comparisons and potentially generating overall frameworks, as (Charmaz, 2006) has described:

> We take segments of data apart, name them in concise terms, and propose an analytic handle to develop abstract ideas from interpreting each segment of data. As we code, we ask: which theoretical categories might these statements indicate? (p.45)

Tempting as it is to have a system rising from the chaos, nevertheless, I was not looking for systematical categories, instead, I highly valued the individual differences in the transition experiences. Although the participants were from the same country, and seemingly had a similar sociocultural background, they were different in various ways, such as their previous learning experiences, family backgrounds, motivations and expectations on the master's study. More importantly, they had vastly distinct responses to the UK Higher Education learning environment and requirements.

Therefore, I adopted Riessman's (2008) thematic narrative analysis method to analyse the data especially for the case studies. Apart from being consistent with the narrative inquiry used for the study, which are discussed previously in this chapter, it acknowledges the discrepancy and diversity of human behaviours (Minichiello et al., 2014). Thematic narrative analysis "keeps a story intact by theorising from the case rather than from component themes (categories) across cases" (Riessman, 2008, p. 53). This method helped me focus on how an individual participant made sense of her/his

transition experience from her/his narrative accounts rather than the common features shared in the transition experiences between one another.

In addition, the narrative accounts the participants provided were not always complete stories, for example, they might have been struggling by the time they were interviewed and could not see a way out. When analysing and presenting the data, I placed each participant back to her/his personal background and took account of the influential factors in the environment. Furthermore, rather than only consider what s/he had said at the moment, I connected the dots within one interview as well as other interviews of hers/his and tried to create a chronological narrative account so that we could not only understand the participant's behaviours and perspectives, but also the reasons behind them. This is what Williams (1984) referred to as "narrative reconstruction" which sees narrative as an interviewee's extended account (Riessman, 2008). Bruner (1990) also noted that "People do not deal with the world event by event or with text sentence by sentence. They frame events and sentences in larger structures" (p. 64). I analysed and presented the participants' individual and collective transition experiences within their living and learning contexts and interpreted their emotions and behaviours in a (whole) picture so that we could understand them within a sociocultural context.

3.6.2 First filter – data selection and transcription

In the early stage of the data analysis, I transcribed a few interviews fully and had some thorough discussions with my supervisors, during which they suggested potential themes generated from the data and how I might connect them with the research questions. As the processes of transcription and data analysis proceeded, I realised the scale of the data I had to deal with and my limited budget of both time and money,

therefore I decided to transcribe the recordings in a selective way. Students who claimed to experience a relatively smoother transition were not given as much emphasis as those who had more obvious transition experiences. This is not to say that the smooth transitions were neglected. Instead, those experiences shared a lot in common and will be used frequently in the finding and discussion chapter to provide a counterpoint to the more challenging transitions to avoid playing to the stereotype that all Chinese students struggle in the same way with transitions. The obvious transitions, on the other hand, were more diverse and required more effort to categorise and represent them in order to answer the research questions and to maximise the benefits this research could potentially bring to this area. To serve these purposes, 15 participants, out of 19, were selected who had relatively more significant changes or dramatic stories according to my field notes and memory of the interviews, and the rich narratives of the transitions of three among these 15 participants eventually were presented as case studies.

During the transcription, I listened to each recording the first time to note down the gist of the incidences as transcript segments and made minutes of the recording for a later visit. Each interview was noted in one transcript document and was imported into NVivo for organising and coding. As the transcripts, accumulated, numerous nodes were generated and categorised during which some stood out and were elevated while some were combined. I then filtered the data by nodes and transcribed the important parts to get them ready to be presented in the findings chapter, if they were finally chosen. As each segment had a recording time noted down, it was fairly easy to locate them in the recordings and transcribe the parts I needed for writing the findings chapter.

For the purposes of confidentiality, each participant was assigned a nickname which is

either related to their personality, appearance or shares the initial letter with their Chinese name. I did not choose an alpha-numeric code because I would prefer to present the participants as vivid characters rather than objective samples in the laboratory. The nickname was also easier to refer to when having a discussion with my supervisors or my colleagues in terms of the data and the individuals' stories. We talked about what happened to Flora, for example, instead of 01S3. An example will be provided in the next section.

3.6.3 Coding as heuristic and second filter

Wearing my analytic lens as a researcher, I made numerous decisions in terms of what to highlight and what to filter out (Saldana, 2009), in the context of a large amount of data. I used NVivo as a helpful tool for the data analysis where I could generate numerous nodes and categorise the transcript segments under multiple nodes. As the data analysis proceeded, I continually created new nodes, uncovered potential themes relevant to my research questions and reorganised the transcript segments under new nodes.

I adopted thematic narrative analysis coding techniques when comparing participants' shared perspectives and responses to similar experiences to generate main themes. When analysing the data, I was not deliberately looking for systematic commonalities with which the participants could be categorised, rather I retained each participant's coded narrative fragments in their cases and interpreted them as a whole. In the findings chapters, I unfolded the participants' personal stories and presented the diversity in their experiences though under the same theme. While the narrative accounts were presented as segments under different themes, I did leave a series of signposts for readers to find out how each story ended. In addition, following the

thematic narrative analysis method, emphasis was placed on the holistic content, i.e. what was the whole story, so the messy spoken narratives were sometimes concatenated and transformed from different times if necessary to improve the readability of the transcripts. (Riessman, 2008)

With NVivo, it was easy to compare the individual transitions chronologically as well as to compare the transitions among the participants in different stages for any similarities or differences. Therefore, when inputting the data in NVivo, I gave each transcript a number under the participants' nicknames to mark which time they were interviewed and the date so that it was easy to capture the participant's changes of attitude, situation, thoughts, etc. in different stages under the same nodes, both themselves and in comparison to others, for each participant had three interview transcripts. For example, Dora's transcripts were marked as 1Dora20160911, 2Dora20170413 and 3Dora20170823. Under the node, change of learning environment – assessment, NVivo showed the transcripts from 1Dora20160911 and 2Dora20170413, followed by 1Jack, 1Jane and 2Jane, etc. Thus, it was easy to learn: whether Dora had shifted her focus on, and attitude to, this topic; how other participants had responded to this topic; and if there were any similarities or obvious differences. This was very helpful when writing up the finding chapters so that I managed to follow up some of the stories in the later stage of the transition.

Here is an example of a subset of the nodes I generated during data analysis. The parent nodes are mostly pre-defined in relation to my research questions to serve the purpose of discovering and capturing the transition in terms of participants' experiences, thoughts, responses and feelings through their self-reports and comparisons made by both themselves and me over the time of the study. The child-nodes and sub-child-nodes, on the other hand, were changing and evolving during the

process of transcription and revisiting the transcripts. As illustrated in the form below, some of the transcripts were coded multiple times under different nodes. Some of coded data are merely a description of what the participants said, ready for further transcription if they are eventually chosen in the finding chapter.

Parent-node	**Child-node**	**Sub-child-node**	**Transcript example**
Comparisons - in timelines	CHC culture		Files\\Engineering\\Ryan\\1 Ryan 19‘ Ryan: When I was young, we used to live in the rural area then I’m not sure how my parents managed to save enough for us to move to the city. They are both school teachers... it’s always been my responsibility to repay them as they have spent all their savings for my tuition fee in the UK.
	Challenge	Assessment	Files\\Education\\Audrey\\1 Audrey 48' She was stressed about the final essay of the pre-sessional course, 1.2k words. Couldn't imagine herself writing such a long essay in English. She had to come up with her own argument which is the most important part. Family support was important; and talking to her flatmate helped her get some ideas. Files\\Education\\Audrey\\2 Audrey 5‘ Audrey: I struggle a lot about essay writing, especially for course SoK. I still don’t know how to use references and critical thinking… they are all very new to me. The requirements of the essays are very general. I don’t even know where to start. The second semester was a bit easier as the requirement was more specific, so my grade got a little higher.
		Internal struggles/self-	Files\\Education\\Mary\\3 Mary

		negotiation	74’ After comparing the cards selection from the three interviews, she noticed her self-discipline had been always an issue. She felt she lacked time-management skills and self-control and therefore she’s not very confident, especially her peers were so much better than her.
		Language barrier	Files\\Education\\Joyce\\3 Joyce 41’ Researcher: What difficulties in your life have you experienced here? Joyce: Language is always a problem, especially when I'm ill. I never needed to describe my syndrome in English when I was ill. I really don't know how to speak to a GP, so I'd rather staying at home. What strikes me the most was once I was seriously ill and had to stay in bed for quite a few days. One of my friends' parents are doctors and suggested some pills according to my syndrome, I tried and they worked, so I continued. Researcher: So basically your friends could solve all your problems. Joyce: Yeah. They also brought me food and took good care of me during those days. I think I'm really lucky.
		Peer Pressure	Files\\Education\\Mary\\3 Mary 74’ After comparing the cards selection from the three interviews, she noticed her self-discipline had been always an issue. She felt she lacked time-management skills and self-control and therefore she’s not very confident, especially her peers were so much better than her.
Changes	Environment	Pedagogy	Files\\Engineering\\Vivian\\1 Vivian 50’ Vivian: After I came here, I really felt being an engineer is pretty good. Before I sometimes questioned myself: you are a girl,

			why did you choose engineering? But I heard the teachers here mentioning so many times that an engineer is a very interesting career, although I'm still not completely sure if a girl can be a good engineer. I think it's a nice job, full of creativity. Researcher: What differences do you feel about your teachers between the two countries, any general impression? Vivian: Hmm, I feel the teachers here not only teach theories, they also like to describe the application in the reality, and they are all very proud of what they are doing. Many teachers in China are also very good teachers, funny, open-minded and made the delivery very easy to understand, but they gave me the impression that they were teaching us merely to do their job. It didn't seem they were so passionate about their areas, or maybe they were, just not showing it much. Files\\Engineering\\Vivian\\2 Vivian 34' Vivian: Although the teachers sometimes give us tasks to do on our own, we are still supported by the well-built university online platforms full of lab menus, reading materials and assessment samples, etc. Alternatively, we can easily find information and methods on Google and YouTube when the teachers don't give specific instructions. However, in China, at least when I was doing my undergraduate, the university couldn't provide such support and we don't have access to so many online resources, so this kind of independent learning couldn't be sustained.
	Personal	Learning	Files\\Engineering\\Jack\\3 Jack 57' Jack: Of course I will seek help (from the top students in the class) When I was doing undergraduate study, I was the one helping others. Generally speaking, the level of the

			students at my school were not so high. I did study hard though. Basically they always came to me for help when they got stuck. Jack: We need to humble ourselves sometimes. To be honest, for the past month (from the beginning of the semester), if we talk about change, I think I have become modest. I asked help only from teachers before (at my previous university), but now I ask my classmates. For example, when I was stuck, their one simple hint may be the shortcut to solve the problem. That can really boost the efficiency. Researcher: What do you feel about your new position among the students? Jack: Well, it is indeed a drop. Before, I used to spend more time to figure out problems myself. But now, I think it's good, coming here, studying with more intelligent people. The environment helps me improve myself. It's important to be able to work with others in the future workplace as well. We all need to make compromise and cooperate.

Table 4 Example of nodes generation and organisation during data analysis

3.6.4 Third filter with both pre-defined and emerging themes

When it came to the time to decide what to present as main themes, I felt the selected data was still too extensive to present in the thesis, as the coding process helped me generate numerous nodes with huge potential for many combinations. Although there was no “right” way of writing the findings, the decision-making tortured me for a long time, until I decided to take it to the research questions.

As I have set out in the interview design, the interview questions were designed around the three pre-set main themes: teaching, learning and assessment (TLA), according to

research questions. Therefore, I decided to use TLA as a third filter so that the parent themes mentioned above which acted as a chronological filter could be filtered again and reorganised according to the research questions. Furthermore, teachers and peers who play important roles in the teaching and learning process were also brought into focus during the interviews. Another main theme, peer support, which was initially designed as part of the interview questions in order to identify potential collective transitions, also emerged. Peers being extremely helpful and supportive during the transition was a surprise both to the participants and me, and thus I had extended the topic in the findings. Therefore, the findings chapter had a main structure that was composed of both the pre-defined TLA themes as well as the emerging themes of TS relationship and Peer support.

The fourth section of "Are Chinese students silent and passive in the classroom?" in the findings chapter was originally placed under the TLA and I was encouraged by my supervisors to consider it as a separate theme. The content of this section brought together findings and discussion, for I not only presented my data but also tried to answer a question, in order to challenge the stereotype in much of the previous literature of Chinese students' being silent and passive learners.

The journey I experienced in the data presentation, i.e. in writing up the findings, was to me a part of the data analysis, during which I constantly revisited my data and re-categorised them in order: to serve the purpose of a better presentation of the data; to answer the research questions; and more importantly to draw attention to the problems the participants had encountered and trusted me with.

3.6.5 Further coding for case studies

My coding technique did not help with the case studies. I had to create individual cases in NVivo to manage and follow up the three individual stories. Following the thematic analysis process (Riessman, 2008), I focused on one interview at a time, then gathered the other two (or three for Flora's case as she was interviewed four times totally) and formed a biographical account of each participant. Later I zoomed into the data, identified each storyline and interpreted them in the whole picture of the individual participant's sociocultural background and unique experience in the UK. Isolating the data in the early stage helped me focus on the individual case study, so that I managed to present varied dramatic biographical stories with diverse transition experiences.

3.6.6 Translation of the data

All the selected data were presented in English although Mandarin was used mainly in the interviews. To be efficient, the translation was conducted along with the transcription during which I met a few translation dilemmas. First of all, as sometimes there were no equivalences in the two languages (Cormier, 2018), I might not be able to accurately convey what the participants actually meant (Kosny et al., 2014). What was more challenging in this process was when I had to explain the Chinese language and its cultural framework in the English language (Cormier, 2018). Halai (2007) called this process "cultural decoding" and explained that "since interviews are not just words spoken at a certain time in response to a social situation, they are embedded in the culture of the place, hence, when translating one must keep the target social group/reader in mind" (p.345). Another issue I was bearing in mind during the translating process was the "further marginalization of minority voices" (Cahnmann, 2005, p.246) as the Chinese master's students had to make their voices in English in my thesis and to make the transcripts readable, I had to at least make sure their narratives make sense.

Facing these dilemmas, there were a series of decisions to be made in order to seek a balance to convey the participants' descriptions as accurately and originally as possible in relatively understandable English language. I took a few precautions actions: during the interviews, I usually repeated what I understood and confirmed with the participants, especially for the critical topics we discussed. After the writing of the finding chapters, I sent some of the chapters and the case study chapters to the individual participant to read and give comments on in order to have their affirmation of the data.

Furthermore, I did not treat translation as a technical task, rather I attempted to keep the original flavour of the language the participants used. For example, in Chinese language, we sometimes tend to use metaphors and implications to describe feelings and situations rather than describing detailed facts (Yang, 2011), because we emphasise meanings and mutual understandings in the conversation contextually more than what actually happened explicitly. This might help explain why some of the supervisors found it confusing to read their Chinese students' writings. I chose to retain the original way of saying because I wanted to remind the readers that they are reading stories of Chinese master's students who could not speak, read, or understand English as native speakers for the influence of their mother tongue guides the way they think. The gap between the two languages, and the cultures behind them cannot be bridged within the one-year study.

3.7 Reflexivity

As the researcher of this study, I consider myself as a mix of both "insider" and "outsider", given the reasons that I was once a master's student having similar cultural

background and experiences as the participants, but now a PhD student and a researcher already familiarised with the UK environment after having lived in UK for more than five years. There are pros and cons for both insider research and outsider research, however, as Milligan (2016) discussed, the "insiderness" and "outsiderness" can be balanced "between the positioning that the researcher actively takes and the ways in which their role is defined by how others are involved in the project."(p.135)

3.7.1 Insider Perspectives

I finished all the public-school education until undergraduate level in China and studied at a university in England for my master's degree and am currently studying for a PhD Degree in Education in a Scottish university. Having lived in China for my first 31 years and in the UK since 2013 allow me to have a thorough insight of what it feels like to be an international student studying and living alone in a foreign country, which Robson (2011) calls "intimate knowledge" (p.403), from both contemporary and historical perspectives. I experienced, as a student, the change of the education in China and witnessed, as a research student in Education, the adjustments (or at least the attempts) being made in the UK universities to accommodate the increasing number of Chinese international students.

The experience offers me a general understanding of the cultures, politics and values of the institutions in both countries, for example the power relations between the teachers and the students, and therefore helped me contribute to the interview conversations and facilitate the participants' self-reflection as I deeply understood their situations. Furthermore, it also helped me understand and interpret the data in the shifted sociocultural contexts from China to UK, although I am aware that my impressions and opinions stem from my own experience and understandings. However,

this knowledge enables my close relatedness to the participants' situation and sensitivity in capturing the data during the interactions (Irvine et al., 2008).

Furthermore, I share the languages (both English and Mandarin) and cultures with the participants so that we could reach understanding without much effort on implications either in language or context which may be easily missed by a second language speaker (Blackledge and Creese, 2010; Hennink, 2008). During the interviews, both the languages were used for communication and in addition, all the data selected were translated into English, as a bilingual researcher, I was able to, "in multilingual settings ... play with various linguistic codes and with the various spatial and temporal resonances of these codes ... [in order to] shape the very context in which the language is learned and used" (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008, p.664).

3.7.2 Knowledge Co-construction

Knowing that advantages in understandings could affect my perspective on the data, I strove to balance my position in the research. Inevitably, my images, thoughts and assumptions permeated the research, from the design of the interview questions, interview dialogues to the themes of the data analysis. I may subconsciously fixate on the topics I have particular interest in during the interviews or attempt to find the results I presumed in the data analysis stage. However, as an active interviewer, I acknowledge that the researchers and the participants are co-constructing knowledge and meaning that are contextual rather than universal truth in world (Miller and Glassner, 1997). Therefore, instead of minimising my existence and intervention to the research, i.e. staying "neutral", I made efforts to encourage the participants to become active interviewees in order to obtain more effective interactions for the co-production of interview data. As Holstein and Gubrium (2003) suggest "rather than searching for

the best or most authentic answer, the aim is to systematically activate applicable ways of knowing – the possible answers – that respondents can reveal, as diverse and contradictory as they might be" (p.15).

Furthermore, my commonality with the participants, i.e. some shared identities and similar struggles during the transition, also contributed to balancing the power relations in the interviews. Although Cousin (2009) warns that commonality does not automatically lead to empathy, I believe it can at least make connections between researchers and participants. During the interviews, I was open to share my experience with the participants when it suited and when they showed interest, so they knew they were not alone, and I was not there to judge their stories.

The data collection lasted more than a year and my interaction with some of the participants was beyond the interview time, for instance, during the workshops I organised, as mentioned previously, and in daily life. I also provided help and answered questions whenever the participants reached me; some of them became very close to me and kept in touch until now. Therefore, I believe to some of the participants, I was not only just a researcher. I was a friend, a big sister, an organizer of social activities, an experienced student in Edinburgh and maybe more. My existence in their lives may have influenced their development more than I know and may have also affected the research findings.

3.7.3 Researcher as an Outsider

On the other hand, I'm also an outsider to some extent, due to my identity as a researcher, a PhD student in Education, especially for the participants from the sciences. This brings certain difficulties in approaching and recruiting the participants,

for the fact that being involved in a social science research does not bring as much benefit as for social science students. However, my outsider role may lead to more information because I am not part of the participants' relations with their peers and teachers (Kara, 2012) and as Miller and Glassner (1997) argue differences encourage conversations. During the interviews, the participants studying in different disciplines from my area were willing to illustrate explicitly their study experiences, such as their laboratory courses and assessment methods. They provided more examples than participants from the School of Education for the education students sometimes assumed I already knew.

During the interviews, I was occasionally surprised by the experience and views provided by the participants, for the complexity of the transitions and individual differences (Wu, 2015), not to mention the fact continuously changing world may have shifted the study life in China and UK higher education which I had experienced 12 years before and 3 years before respectively. Therefore, I kept my mind open and flexible to any interesting findings that emerged in the empirical data, as McNess et al., (2013) point out, "this type of stranger, or outsider, is seen in a positive light, as the expert who sees things clearly and has much to contribute" (p.24).

Revisiting the interview recordings and transcribing and translating them were an emotional journey for me. Some of the stories were so shocking and full of pain that I felt I had the responsibility, as an educator, to solve the problems they had encountered or at least to provide insightful explanations despite my limited capacity. I strove to make even a small contribution to improve the international students' situations during my study even when I felt helpless and I knew I was not expected to answer all the questions. The narratives gave me motivation and courage to keep going as I could not stay an outsider hearing the students' suffering.

Amongst those with whom I had shared a great deal both in life and during the interviews, the selection of data to present was particularly challenging as apart from serving the purpose of answering the research questions, I also cared about their wellbeing and wanted to let the world notice how their stories unfolded at, and beyond, the point of their graduation. Moreover, listening to these recordings took me time travelling – the personal feelings we shared and the meanings we co-constructed at the time of interviews shifted over time. We talked about the people we loved and forgave; talked about things we cared and moved on from. The recordings left the trace of a year time we stayed in Edinburgh and reminded me how much I had changed when I revised the data a few months to a year later. Listening to the data, contacting the previous self, was a self-reflective process during which I challenged my interview skills, checked whether I had misunderstood the participants, and sometimes wished I had asked a critical/different question.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical consideration was given throughout the design and the conduct of the data collection. Approved by the Moray House School of Education Ethics Committee, I conducted the research with full respect to the participants and responsibility as a social science researcher. I approached the potential participants as a researcher and a friend, who respected them as voluntary contributors to my research and as active interviewees who were free to talk about their feelings and opinions without worrying about any confidentiality issues.

I used Mandarin to explain to all the potential participants the nature of the research and what to expect if they decided to be involved, to make sure they could understand.

I gave them the choice of using English or Mandarin or both during the interviews and explained both the advantages and disadvantages of using either language. For those who chose to use English in the interviews, I told them the main purpose of using either language was to achieve better and effective communication, so they could switch languages whenever they felt necessary. For those Mandarin users, I informed them the data would be presented in English, but before the final draft was finished, I would send them the transcripts and my relevant writings for them to confirm and comment on.

I distributed the consent forms before the first interviews with each participant, carefully explained the key points and made sure the participants understood. I repeatedly emphasised the right of the participants to refuse answering any questions or to withdraw from the research at anytime without any reasons during the whole data collection process. Before they signed the consent form, I confirmed with them that there were no doubts or questions not being raised and acknowledged that signing the consent form did not mean signing a contract – they did not need to feel obliged to complete all the interviews. When I was presenting the data, when having a discussion with my supervisors or writing for my thesis, I carefully concealed any identifiable information and kept the consent forms only to myself.

Cotterill (1992) suggests that “unless respondents feel the interviewing process offers them some personal involvement and satisfaction, the possibility of repeated, in-depth interviews is unlikely” (p.595). During the interviews, some of the participants were highly cooperative and I could feel they were trying to probe what kind of answers I was hoping to get, especially those who were the acquaintances of my friends. They were sitting there, trying to finish a task by helping me with my interviews. I stopped them and emphasised one more time that they only needed to tell me what they felt comfortable talking about or what they thought was worth mentioning. I was not trying

to get any presumed answers so there was no such thing as a right answer or a better answer. I also encouraged the students to express themselves in different ways, drawing or making charts. I sometimes challenged their answers and let them defend themselves, this sometimes led to self-reflection and an alternative construction of their meanings.

Chapter 4 Findings

4.1 Introduction

Following the data analysis approach described in the Methodology, this chapter presents the major findings from the 3 individual interviews with 19 participants involved in this study. Due to the large amount of data from more than 60 hours of interviews and the word limit of the thesis, I picked four main themes that emerged from the data that could provide deep insights into the Chinese students' transition experience in the UK masters' programmes, as well as answering the research questions. I also chose three individual stories as three case studies to present in detail the process of the personal transition and how the individual participants reflected on this.

As discussed in the Methodology Chapter, the majority of the participants chose to speak Mandarin during the interviews. The transcripts of the interviews with the two participants, Dora and Audrey, who chose to speak English in the first interview, will be quoted directly and marked in the brackets after the quote as "transcript from 1st interview". However, for the sake of the better communication, we did not stick to English to the end of the interviews. Therefore, for the part we spoke Mandarin or mixed Mandarin and English, as well as the interviews with the rest of the participants who chose to speak Mandarin, the transcripts provided in this chapter were all translated by me, which will be marked in the brackets as transcript and translation, along with the interview rounds.

Also as mentioned in the Methodology Chapter, when translating the conversations, I tried to present each participants' words by directly translating the literal meaning,

therefore, you may find some metaphors that are not commonly used in English and some unclear pronouns in the dialogues. However, when presenting the data in the findings, I will add comments in brackets to either explain the meaning or provide the context. When I refer to anyone in the transcripts, mostly a particular teacher, I will mostly use s/he or her/his. The reason is I am unclear of the gender because she and he, her and his share the same pronunciation in Mandarin respectively. I will only specify the gender when I know it.

No.	Participants	Programmes Enrolled
1	Audrey	Educational Programme
2	Tracy	
3	Dora	
4	Flora	
5	Jane	
6	Joyce	
7	Mary	
8	Rachael	
9	Minnie	
10	Tanton	Science Programme
11	Francis	
12	Ryan	Engineering Programme
13	April	
14	Vivian	
15	Jack	

Table 5 Participants and Programmes Enrolled

4.2 Teaching, learning and assessment

As one of the research questions asks, “How do UK teaching, learning and assessment

practices affect Chinese students' identities as learners?", the study is designed to place focus on the three main factors – teaching, learning and assessment, which I will refer to as TLA in the following. TLA in the UK HE was largely discussed in the interviews and for some of the participants, they have had a significant influence on their academic transition experiences. However, the influence varied depending on individual situations and pervious learning experiences.

The participants' comments suggest that not every participant felt the teaching methods adopted in UK HE were noticeably different from their previous learning experiences of undergraduate study in China. For those who reported differences, the pedagogies in different disciplines placed different foci according to the nature and needs of the areas, and thus posed different challenges to the Chinese students. At the School of Education, according to the participants, teachers tended to inspire and encourage students to think and express their opinions, therefore many participants reported extensive opportunities to speak in the classroom, both in front of the class and in the group discussions. On the other hand, participants studying in the science and engineering programmes largely reported that both the teaching and learning activities and assessments emphasised that students are required to have high ability in analysis and application. Some students preferred this new way of learning for it enhanced their understanding of the knowledge for both the old and the new, while some struggled to adapt.

Moreover, the students gave various explanations for why Chinese students are seemingly reluctant to engage in discussions or to ask questions during class, such as cultural issues, personal habits and language barriers.

4.2.1 Similar TLA adopted in the old and new learning environment

Some of the participants, from both social science and science programmes, reported that the pedagogies used in their masters' study in the UK were not so different from their undergraduate study in China and they did not feel they had to make significant efforts to adapt. Here I quote two participants' transcripts, Joyce from an education programme and Ryan from an engineering programme, as examples.

> Joyce: I used to be studying in a foreign language university, which probably adopted the western way of teaching, so it's very similar to here. We also had a lot of presentations and many quizzes as part of the assessment results. I'm not a very chatty person in my personal life and tend to be the one listening in a group, but I pushed myself to speak more in the classroom in China and here too, as long as I felt I was able to express myself clearly.
> (Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

> Researcher: If we compare the teacher-student interaction in the classroom between China and UK, do you feel there's any difference so far?
> Ryan: No difference. It's the same here – the teachers are speaking the whole time and we don't want to ask questions. Once we asked questions in the class very frequently, the teacher said: could you let me finish teaching first then you can ask questions. We got very confused because we thought the foreign teachers would be more open-minded. However, only after answering a few questions, s/he said the schedule of the session was very tight and s/he's concerned that maybe s/he couldn't finish the teaching content for the session so let us wait to the end.
> (Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

In fact, Ryan was a little disappointed in his classroom experience in the UK, due to his

high prior expectations.

> Ryan: I was told all the time growing up that the teaching in the West was so much better and the interaction in the classroom was so much more and we could easily understand… It's actually not. The classroom is just the teacher is speaking all the time, asking questions occasionally, nothing special.
> (Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

However, many of the participants, perhaps due to their different undergraduate study experiences, recounted differences between China and the UK in terms of the TLA. I will discuss these differences in detail in the following sections.

4.2.2 Guiding rather than transmitting as the new pedagogy

Many participants expressed that the teaching methods adopted in the UK tend to be guiding rather than transmitting which was more commonly used in their undergraduate study. In other words, the students are encouraged and expected to think independently, making connections and developing their own understandings of the new knowledge. This was reported in both social science and science programmes in the research, despite being enacted in different ways.

For example, Minnie, from the School of Education, had a clear expectation of the teachers in her higher education experience and expressed her contentment and preference for the new teaching methods.

> Minnie: When I just arrived, I hoped the teachers here can be more knowledgeable, more professional in their area. Many teachers in my undergraduate were really not so much. They

were teaching merely by paraphrasing the textbook and I couldn't make connections to the main points. I think a teacher in the university should be able to inspire students to think instead of repeating the information from textbooks. I hope the teachers could help me find connections to the knowledge, direct me the way to my study and inspire me to think.

Researcher: So you don't want the teachers to repeat the knowledge, rather, you think they should lead you to think and develop your own understanding. Is it right?

Minnie: Yeah. I think the teachers should be able to provide more than textbooks. After I read a book, I may have gained the information, but my understanding may be limited to the literal meanings. So, it's important if the teachers could help me connect the points or remind me of what I have overlooked.

Researcher: Have the teachers here met your expectation?

Minnie: Yeah, I think so. Most of them can guide us to think and develop our own understandings, instead of teaching us the knowledge. I think they are very professional in teaching and in their own areas.

(Transcript and translation from 2nd interview.)

From her explanation, we can see that Minnie distinguished the definition of teaching into two different methods, transmitting and guiding, where transmitting refers to the teachers' solo action to deliver knowledge in the teaching and learning activities, whilst guiding, in addition to the delivery, also requires the teachers' awareness to engage the students in thinking, connecting and processing the knowledge in their own ways. Minnie identified the pedagogy used in the UK as guiding rather than transmitting, which suited her needs and expectations for postgraduate study.

Another participant, Jane, from the School of Education also spotted the different pedagogies adopted in her undergraduate study in China and the postgraduate study in the UK. She particularly commented on the classroom engagement and found it helpful

because it helped her concentrate.

> Jane: I like to be engaged…I become more focused and if I was able to talk about my ideas, I was more motivated to express more next time, thereby more focused.
> …
> For example, when I was in a lecture with all the new information, I could probably only understand 30%, not much, or maybe I could understand more but I will forget very soon.
> …
> The effort of thinking and processing the knowledge and information can leave me a very deep impression. So, I think the most important thing is not how much I've received, rather, how much effort I put in thinking and processing. (Transcript and translation from 2nd interview.)

Jane believed her improved ability in learning and thinking outweighed the knowledge and information she had gained, which, in the last interview, was expressed as the most important achievement in her master's study. Jane accepted what was offered in the new learning environment based on her knowledge of her learning habits and her background as a teacher in China. She was adapting to the new teaching methods, experiencing and evaluating them, and had decided to apply them in her future teaching back in China.

Vivian from the School of Engineering mentioned a teacher with a seemingly guiding-dominated style but it was not so popular among the students.

> Vivian: We have a teacher that many of my classmates really don't like. They often complain that the teacher doesn't teach much, merely giving us tasks to do during the class. I don't have any problem with that, but I understand why my classmates complain. The teacher has her/his own business

so is quite busy, and I've heard that s/he also doesn't reply emails to her/his supervisees. But I personally quite like this course and can manage the homework myself, so I don't have a problem with it.
(Transcript and translation from 2nd interview.)

Vivian did not like or dislike this method, instead, she kept her mind open and accepted what was available in her new learning environment.

Vivian: I think the teachers here generally emphasise students' independent thinking. They told us that they were merely introducing us the existing theories or methods, but it's our decision which ones to take or not.
Researcher: Or maybe the teachers are just lazy.
Vivian: Hahaha, maybe.
Researcher: Do you agree with this method?
Vivian: Yeah, I can live with it. Every teacher has one's own style. We also have teachers here who give us very detailed illustrations. I think it also depends on the disciplines.
(Transcript and translation from 2nd interview.)

Vivian recalled her previous learning environment and felt the majority of the teachers tended to give more detailed information in their teaching rather than leaving students tasks to do without instructions. However, she understood the rationale for the required capacity for independent learning in her current study in the UK. She believed the new pedagogy is adopted based on the well-built university online platforms, as well as the extensive online resources. In China, those resources are limited or constrained, and thus are insufficient to support the university students to study on their own.

Vivian: Although the teachers sometimes give us tasks to do on our own, we are still supported by the well-built university online platforms full of lab menus, reading materials, exam paper

samples and so on. Alternatively, we can easily find information and methods on Google and YouTube when the teachers don't give specific instructions. However, in China, at least when I was doing my undergraduate, the university couldn't provide such support and we don't have access to so many online resources, so this kind of independent learning couldn't be sustained.
(Transcript and translation from 2nd interview.)

4.2.3 Critical thinking in the new learning environment

Another difference in the UK TLA reported by the participants is critical thinking, which was a challenge to nearly every participant and may potentially have had more significant effect on their identities as learners and social beings. The majority of students held an open mind to this new requirement.

Tracy from the School of Education expressed that she constantly encountered critical thinking practices especially in the classroom interaction with the teachers.

Researcher: Do you feel there is any different expectation or requirement for you in your master's study compared with your undergraduate?

Tracy: I feel there isn't a right answer here. We are encouraged to think, to indulge in wild fantasies, and to speak, even about the pre-mature ideas. Whereas in China, the answers are usually pre-set so the only thing we need to do is to remember, as much as possible. We were asked to follow rather than challenge or think about ways to improve. This is how we were assessed -- as long as remembering them, we could pass. I think this is a big difference. Here the teachers always asked: "What do you think? Can you think of other ways to achieve this?" Before (in China), nobody cared about what I thought. The teachers only cared about what they thought, how to deliver their thoughts and how to make us

remember more.

Researcher: What do you feel about this new requirement? The teachers no longer tell you the answers, instead, they ask you what you think.

Tracy: I think it's good…thinking in different dimensions. I read about critical thinking when I was in China, but didn't have chances to practise, thinking in different dimensions. Now I have to think this way, I'm being pushed to practise on a daily basis. I think it's good. I wanted to practise before, but I didn't have the chance, the guidance or the environment. Now our classroom discussions have created the suitable atmosphere for us to open our minds. It's not the teachers opening our minds, it's us, probing and exploring.

Researcher: Why did you want to practise critical thinking when you were still in China?

Tracy: I like reading. Once I read about Popular Psychology, mentioning most of the people are easily manipulated by the media because they lack the ability of independent thinking. So, I think I should learn how to think critically, so I don't just accept whatever people tell me.

(Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

Tracy described a proactive process of the development of her learner autonomy, in particular, her initiative in learning critical thinking, by expanding her mind and pushing the boundaries. However, the willingness to develop her critical thinking skills did not help with her assignments, because she was struggling with procrastination throughout her master's study, which I will discuss later in 4.3.2.1. The extent of teachers' intervention and supervision.

In fact, students were not merely required to think critically in the teaching and learning activities, they were also expected to apply the skills in their reading, writing and other assignments. For the same reason, the majority of the assessments at the School of Education were essays which could be challenging to those who were used to memory-based exams. Jane, studying in social science programmes in both her

undergraduate and master's study, reported that the assessment methods in China and the UK were very different.

> Jane: Most of the assessments in my programme here are essays, one is half essay and half exam, while in my undergraduate most of them were memory-based exams. We needed to approach them by memorising a large amount of information, like names, year of the event, definition of terms. We had short answer and discussion type of questions in the exams as well but there were techniques to answer those questions: there were a few points we needed to mention in each question, which we prepared and remembered. The marking depends on how many points we hit according to the right answer.
> ……
> The way to approach essays are very different which involves a lot of decision makings. I need to start wide, researching in literatures first around the chosen topic, then to narrow it down and find the connections between each point I want to make, also I need to have enough supporting evidence and discussion to make my points convincing. Basically, apart from the topic, everything is flexible and determined by me. The process can be quite painful. Essay writing is very challenging.
> (Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

In terms of essay writing, I had an interesting discussion during the interview with Flora, also from the School of Education, about her undergraduate dissertation (in language studies), where she was criticised severely in the viva for not taking a side in her argument.

> Researcher: I think they could say your argument was not properly supported, but they shouldn't say your argument was wrong. What if you discussed in your dissertation that the argument you made was only from your understanding, there's still a

lot to explore in this area.

Flora: They would say I didn't have a proper conclusion.

Researcher: Can't it be your conclusion?

Flora: You mean my conclusion was I was not sure which side to take.

Researcher: Yeah, because there were still a lot to explore in this area, and the current literatures you could find couldn't support the argument.

Flora: I couldn't say it's the whole China, but I believe it's really rare at my school.

Researcher: You had to take side and made a clear argument from one side.

Flora: Yeah, it's not like here, you can say I agree with A, but I also see the limitation of A, but in China, if you agree with A, you have to say, err…

Researcher: You have to say A is right, and B, C and D are wrong?

Flora: I didn't need to mention B, C and D. I just needed to talk about why A is right.

Researcher: If you only talk about why A is right in UK, not mentioning B, C and D, and not mentioning the limitation of A, you are screwed.

Flora: Yeah, I know. In China, we have this habit that we automatically believe the opposite of white is black, but here when writing the critical review, there are other colours between white and black, like grey and others. There are many others existing.

Researcher: You already have this impression?

Flora: Yeah, I quite like this.

Researcher: You like it. It's not strange to you?

Flora: I'm here to learn. I want to see things from different perspectives. That's what I want to learn more. I like the diversity.

Researcher: So, have you started to develop this kind of diversity?

Flora: I think so.

(Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

Flora had a fluctuating transition in her master's study in the UK, during which she actively interacted with students from different cultural backgrounds, explored her

limitations, developed many learning and life skills, and also retrieved confidence and mended her wounded heart from previous experiences. Her case was so interesting that I listed her as one of the case studies which may help the readers to develop a further understanding of a personal transition in both study and life and how they interrelated with each other. Please refer to 5.3 Flora's Story later in this thesis.

This above quoted transcript was from our first contact when Flora had sensitively captured the new availability in the environment and actively taken chances. The idea of many colours between black and white took her beyond and unfolded a new world. Therefore, critical thinking did not only apply to learning, but also to personal development, which, in the cases of Tracy and Flora, was seeded in either China or the UK, developed and was practiced in the UK learning environment, integrated in the students' lives and reshaped their understanding of the world.

There are other examples in terms of the development of critical thinking as this topic was frequently mentioned during the interviews by both social science and science students. However, due to the different natures of the disciplines, students demonstrated distinct ways of practising and development. Critical thinking was brought into focus at the School of Education from the very beginning of the first semester until the dissertation writing, as the ability was required throughout the classroom discussion, reading and writing which composed most of the study. On the other hand, in science and engineering programmes, where discussion, reading and essay writing were less frequently needed, students needed to establish their ability of critical thinking in problem solving. In fact, if I may invite the readers to pay attention to the following transcripts that are noted as 2nd or 3rd interview in the finding chapters, you may also notice after 1-2 semesters' practices, some of the participants had become more critical in their comments when being interviewed.

4.3 Teacher-student relationships

The majority of the participants reported the teachers in the UK are vastly different than their previous ones not only at undergraduate level but also before that: on the one hand, teachers in the UK are more friendly and approachable; on the other, they no longer monitor or push the students in their study or life as much as their teachers in China, and there is no punishment when the students make mistakes.

This study found that teachers in the UK learning environment play an important role in Chinese students' transition in numerous aspects. Although some teachers are not British, with years of experience living and working in the UK, they represent and deliver the British culture both socially and academically. This is undoubtedly more obvious among the student cohorts enrolled in a programme with more than 90% of Chinese students, and the individuals having few contacts with the local community and the students from other cultural backgrounds. Therefore, teachers' requirements and expectations, despite with personal preference and bias, may compose a significantly higher proportion of students' UK learning experience than the teachers realise. Therefore, when teachers give feedback and suggestions, even with a gentle tone, as they seemingly represent the new rules in the new environment, students may take them as commands; and the teachers' being gentle and negotiable may not always ease the process but instead confuse the students. However, teachers' professional morality and passion were also reported repeatedly to have a powerful effect on students' identities in pursuing their future careers. I hereby present three main facets.

4.3.1 Perceived differences and similarities in relationships between China and the UK

Although some students reported the pedagogy in their masters' study in the UK was not significantly different compared with their undergraduate study in China, every participant in this study who expressed opinion about teacher-student relationship reported the differences in how they were taught in the UK and thereby they noticed the new teacher-student relationships. For example, participant Joyce, from the School of Education, mentioned she felt the teachers in the UK were more like friends and she enjoyed her close relationship with them. Such differences may relate to the differences in education values held by both teachers and students in the two countries. In this thesis, I do not intend to judge which one is better, what I want to present is how the shift in the teacher-student relationship helped reshape students' learner identities.

From the research data, the more equal position the students felt they had in the new teaching and learning relationship possessed two main aspects. Social aspects, that is, the teachers position themselves more like students' friends, including letting the students call them by their first names and bringing snacks and baking to the classroom. The other is the academic aspect where students felt their academic opinions were encouraged and treated as valuable in the UK.

4.3.1.1 Social aspects: teachers' and students' roles and positions

Participants had a general impression that the teachers in their new learning environment in this Scottish university were more approachable and in a more equal position with the students, compared with the teachers in China in their previous learning experience, for both undergraduate study and the 9-year compulsory

education.

Joyce:	I feel the most obvious difference is the relationship between the teachers and the students. In China, the distance between the two is greater while here we are more like friends. But I've not lived here for long, so just a primary feeling. One of our teachers even took us for a walk in the main streets in the city centre to help us get familiar with this city. I don't think the teachers in China would do the same thing. One of the teachers also brought us snacks and baked goods for the goodbye session, and we had a party. A Chinese teacher would just ask if we had any questions and that's it.
Researcher:	Do you prefer the relationship with your teachers here?
Joyce:	Yeah, I like to be close to the teachers.
	(Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

Some of the students reported that teachers in their previous experience were positioned, by both teachers and students, as the "authority" with certain privileges. The most extreme case given by participant Audrey shows that some of the students may have felt reluctant to contradict to their teachers in China due to fear.

Audrey reported that there were two most obvious differences between the two countries in higher education: the first, teachers treated each student equally, while her previous teachers in China were only focusing on the best performing students; the second, teachers let the students use the teachers' first names, rather than call them teacher, which made her feel more relaxed and less afraid of making mistakes. (In Mandarin, teacher is a title, so we call a teacher the same way as we call a doctor or a professor in English but with a different sequence: surname + title.)

Audrey:	When I came to UK, the first impression of this university is teachers always take care of each one in their classes.
	……

> The teacher is friendlier to us. She will ask us to call her name instead of calling her teacher, which makes me feel comfortable. It's like she is our friend. So, I'm not nervous in front of her, and I don't mind embarrassing myself when I make a mistake… My previous teachers (in my undergraduate study) always focus only on the best performed students. (Transcript from 1st interview.)

Audrey mentioned her previous teacher was expected to be treated as a god/dess and the students were required to be obedient, therefore, the students were not encouraged to disagree with the teachers. If anyone raised any disagreement, it's considered as disrespecting the teacher and the student would be sent to the back of the classroom, which meant they would receive the least attention from the teachers.

> Audrey: In my subject, it's actually weird. It seems like the teacher is the god. You have to do everything he asks you to do in your studies. Even we have to speak about our opinions, we have to consider whether it will offend him, violating his authority.
> Researcher: Were you encouraged to express your opinions?
> Audrey: That's the point. We never have our own opinions. We are never encouraged.
> (Transcript from 1st interview.)

Audrey gave an example that one of her classmates was punished by a short-tempered teacher during her undergraduate study. For the purpose of confidentiality, I will have to omit some of the details. The gist of the story was the teacher yelled at the student in front of the staff and other students, then damaged her personal belongings on purpose as a punishment the next day. This student did not raise a complaint afterwards and everyone in her class kept silent when the school was investigating.

> Audrey: We couldn't say anything…It just ended with no result…The teacher would teach us for four years…Nobody wanted to get

into trouble. (Transcript from 1st interview.)

Another participant Jack, from engineering mentioned with excitement about his recent finding in the new learning environment, despite it not being in his own programme.

> Jack: I heard from a friend studying at the Business School that the students could be arguing with the lecturers for different opinions in the class, but they are good friends in life. It's like I don't agree with you, but I guard your right with my life to make your voice. They sometimes can have a very intense debate in the classroom. (Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

Jack liked this kind of atmosphere where students' voices are valued, although he rarely had such opportunities in his class, because he felt the engineering students so far (in the first semester) were not yet able to have a discussion with the lecturers in terms of different solutions. However, he also commented, from his own experience, that teachers in his programme made students feel they were respected and supported, which will be discussed further in 5.2 Jack's story. To Jack, the relationship with teachers had become simpler, as there was no obvious quid pro quo and he did not need to please the teachers to draw attention like before in China. A similar change of teacher-student relationship in the UK was reported by Flora and was explicitly described in her case study at 5.3 in this thesis.

It is suggested that Audrey and Jack have both realised respecting the teachers in the new learning environment has a different implication, that is, having a disagreement and expressing it, even in public, will not offend the teachers, instead, such behaviours are encouraged and even rewarded. From their perspectives, both of them had enjoyed

and been exploring the new boundaries in the new relationship with their teachers. The implication of the new relationship made me wonder whether students holding a similar belief of being respectful may also be constrained and intimidated by the "authority" of their teachers, in their development of learner autonomy, specifically in terms of critical thinking and autonomous learning abilities.

4.3.1.2 Academic aspects: valuing student engagement and opinions

Unlike the spoon-feeding image of the Chinese students portrayed in some literature, the research data has prevailing evidence showing that some Chinese students are willing to be engaged and appreciated such activity in the learning process.

> Rachael: In the UK, the teaching and learning is no longer the teacher standing in the front talking as an authority. Instead, the teachers are in equal position with the students, like a friend, exchanging ideas with us and learning and getting inspired from each other. (Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

> Mary: The teachers here tend to encourage the students' engagement while the teachers in China generally did most of the talking in the class. The teachers here often ask if we have questions and pay attention to whether we have understood or get engaged in the classroom activities. (Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

Dora, from The School of Education, is another participant expressing her appreciation of the new relationship. She embraced the differences, provided valuable personal insights, and she even took it further – the new teaching-learning relationship had reshaped her learner identities. Dora mentioned she particularly liked the workshops,

and considered them as a new experience, for the majority of the teaching in her undergraduate study was lectures and she was not given many opportunities to talk about her ideas.

Dora:	I prefer the workshops here compared with the lectures in China. They give us a lot of space, to think and to discuss. But I think there are many reasons (for this new type of pedagogy). Many students have work or intern experience, not like undergraduates who are not as mature and need more guidance. …… More importantly, I think the reason lies in our recognition of the teachers' identities. In my undergraduate, my teacher decided my final assessment grades. If I didn't behave in front of the teacher, it would affect my grades. So the teacher was acting like the authority. We reckoned whatever s/he said was always right. Now I certainly think the teachers are the authority, but they give us a lot of respect and a lot of freedom. It's vastly different from China. I feel I'm free to express my opinions. I wouldn't say anything in China, instead I would just follow whatever the teachers asked me to do. Here, I would tell the teachers my ideas and they might even give me some feedback. I feel my opinion matters. It can be potentially a sort of knowledge. I feel critical thinking and creative thinking are encouraged here.
Researcher:	But in China, it's not that the teachers didn't allow you to speak, it's you chose not to speak.
Dora:	I think it's a long-term accumulation of the whole education atmosphere. (Transcript and translation from 2nd interview.)

From what Dora described, we could see that the students expect and were used to the fact that the teachers were in control in the power relationship. Moreover, they also acknowledge the teachers had the absolute authority in the knowledge of the disciplines, i.e. whatever the teachers said was right or at least not challengeable.

Dora depicted an incident that happened during her undergraduate study. It left a very deep impression on her and it represented the general teaching and learning atmosphere in her previous learning experience.

Dora:	Once we were in a Grammar class and the teacher said the grammar a girl used was wrong. The girl immediately shut up. I felt what the teacher said was not completely correct, but nobody would challenge that.
Researcher:	Why?
Dora:	Maybe because we were not enlightened. We have been spoon-fed the whole time growing up, so we are used to assuming the teachers are always right. (Transcript and translation from 2nd interview.)

The quotes above from Dora are transcribed and translated from an interview spoken in mixed languages of both Mandarin and English. I kept Dora's original expression "authority" however I think it has different meanings when Dora referred to the teachers in China and in the UK. The "authority" of the teachers in China is more likely to mean the teachers had power and control to command and have the right to decide the students' fate, in this case, their grades. In most of the Chinese universities, according to the participants, assessment results, usually two major ones every semester, are the only measurement that matters for a student's performance at school, which decides whether this student can have the teachers' attention and thereby opportunities such as to attend conferences and receive scholarships, etc. Thus, the power distance in such teaching and learning environment is relatively higher, where the students tend to be reluctant to challenge the teachers, even when they have a disagreement. On the other hand, the "authority" of the teachers in the UK can be interpreted as being professional and knowledgeable in certain areas.

When students were invited to take part in the discourses, the change of power distance had had a huge impact on Dora's learner identities, for teachers' encouragement and equal position left students space to develop their thoughts and to stretch their potential. As identities are complex and can be influenced by a number of factors in the individual's life, other aspects in Dora's transition process, for example her successful financial freedom from her part-time job in the UK also gave her the confidence to be partially independent from her family. Later in her dissertation stage, when facing the conflicting views between her father and her dissertation supervisor in terms of her research project, after her self-struggle and repeated negotiation with the people who used to control her choices and looked after her interests in all kinds of ways, she took the leap and made a bold decision to follow her heart instead of either her father or her supervisor, which signified her turning point towards learner autonomy.

By working part-time and working with her dissertation supervisor, she gradually became independent from her family, financially and mentally. Dora had been working as a purchasing agent for people in China. She exercised her social ability by continually negotiating with her costumers and extending her knowledge with the market. She was proud of her achievement because it was the first time she made money and it was already enough to cover her whole year is accommodation and the expenses for a few European trips. She valued her experience in the UK and Europe and embraced her life with the focus shifting away progressively from a student who only put study as the priority and measured herself only according to the study performance. From the second and third interview, it was revealed gradually that her value and life style had obviously changed:

Dora: I think an ideal learner should have a colourful life and be

able to balance life and study.
(Transcript and translation from 3rd interview.)

At the beginning of the dissertation stage, Dora mentioned that she struggled due to the high-pressure from her father in terms of choosing the dissertation topic. Dora's father worked in academia and, to her, he was always the authority that made more advanced decisions for her. Dora's father believed she should choose the topic that benefited her the most in the future career she was pursuing in the higher education institution. However, when she planned her dissertation project as instructed, her supervisor had different opinions and questioned whether Dora had enough time and capacity to finish such a big project. My second interview with Dora happened to capture the struggling moment as she felt she was between the two superiors, and after having changed the topic a few times she felt she had disappointed them both. Fortunately, in the third interview, I learnt that Dora managed to rise above and decide the topic to her own interest. Dora talked to her father to inform him that she wanted to make the decision on her own and chose the topic she was able to manage. On the other hand, though working with her supervisor, Dora did not completely accept everything her supervisor suggested. She made all the critical decisions and only chose the advice that she believed was suitable to her own situation. She developed a new relationship with both her father and supervisor.

Dora: Before, I expect the supervisor to give me clear guidance, but now I think I'm a teacher, maybe because my major is about teaching and the lectures always repeat that
……
I feel my opinion matters, and I'm not learning from the teachers, rather I'm exchanging my ideas with them.
(Transcript and translation from 2nd interview.)

4.3.1.3 Teachers as role models.

Another difference reported by the students is that the teachers in the UK, in addition to teaching, prepared the students to transform to their identities as a teacher, engineer, or scientist. The teachers acted as role models to welcome and inspire the student to their future career. As a result, students studying in School of Education were willing to begin the journey as an educator, carrying the responsibility and devoting their effort to deliver the knowledge in an effective way.

> Jane: I think some of them are very inspiring. In the classroom after the teaching, they said: this is how I teach as a teacher, if you agree with my methods you can do the same in your future class.
> Researcher: So, they set a teaching example.
> Jane: Yeah, so we experienced as students and understood from empirically which way was more effective for the student to learn. Then they explained the techniques they used and gave us tips.
> (Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

While teachers in the School of Education generally train the future teachers and educators by demonstrating how to teach and engage students through teaching, science and engineering students were led to think like an engineer or a scientist and were inspired by the teachers' passion in their disciplines.

> Vivian: After I came here, I really felt being an engineer is pretty good. Before I sometimes questioned myself: you are a girl, why did you choose engineering? But I heard the teachers here mentioning so many times that an engineer is a very interesting career, although I'm still not completely sure if a girl can be a good engineer. I think it's a nice job, full of creativity.

Researcher: What differences do you feel about your teachers between the two countries, any general impression?

Vivian: Hmm, I feel the teachers here not only teach theories, they also like to describe the application in the reality, and they are all very proud of what they are doing. Many teachers in China are also very good teachers, funny, open-minded and made the delivery very easy to understand, but they gave me the impression that they were teaching us merely to do their job. It didn't seem they were so passionate about their areas, or maybe they were, just not showing it much.
(Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

Francis from a science programme expressed his appreciation for having a supervisor from a similar cultural background, willing to take Francis under her/his wings and provide him with resources and opportunities during his dissertation. Francis looked up to his supervisor, admired her/his achievement, and considered her/him as his mentor and role model.

Francis: My supervisor is pretty strict and has high standard. He expects that I could do my project independently, but I'm always welcome to ask questions. I also keep him updated about the process and he's given me feedbacks and instructions. I am very touched.

Researcher: Why do you feel so?

Francis: For a student studying in a foreign country, I'm very lucky to meet a nice supervisor that is willing to give instructions and approve my work. I really appreciate that.

Researcher: Sounds like your supervisor is very responsive.

Francis: Yeah. I feel everything is under his control, but he also gives me plenty of space. He has officially added me into his lab list so I'm officially working in his lab with his PhD students. It means he's treating me as a lab member, although I'm finishing in only 3 months. I'm also invited to attend the weekly lab meeting. It feels quite good. I'm still a master's student, but I'm working with and am surrounded by the PhD students. It's like the lab membership experience.

(Transcript and translation from 2nd interview.)

Joining the PhD candidates' group and working with them, even though as a master's student, signified the affirmation of Francis's performance and thus encouraged him to work hard to be worthy of a place among his new peers. In addition, the experience prepared Francis for his dream job working in a lab and gave him confidence to carry out experiment independently. After his master's study, Francis continued to pursue a PhD degree.

4.3.2 Mismatching expectation in the development of autonomous learning

In UK higher education especially at master's level, students are generally expected to be autonomous in their learning, which means teachers believe students should take much of the responsibility for their learning. This may be challenging to those who are used to parent-like teaching and learning relationships. However, the requirement of learner autonomy is not carried out in a completely free environment: students are still to meet both the short-term and long-term aims designed in the curriculum, to follow every rule of the assignment according to the marking criteria; meanwhile the teachers are in the position to decide, although somewhat negotiable, the topic of each discussion, the grades of each assignment. Therefore, even though the power relationship is reported repeatedly to have shifted, the teachers in the UK HE still remain the controlling position. This is particularly obvious in the supervisor-supervisee relationship during the dissertation time, revealed in the 2nd and 3rd interviews.

4.3.2.1 The extent of teachers' intervention and supervision

Joyce: I feel the teachers in China tend to be pushier, whipping us

(like a shepherd) to do the work, while in UK, we need to take the responsibility of our own learning, because if we don't do it well, the teachers think it's our problems. For the same case in China, the teachers are very likely to have a talk with us.

……

Maybe because we are still at the EAP stage. For example, if our tutor asked us to prepare something for the session, but we didn't, s/he felt ok, and simply skipped to the next module. Nobody would get criticised but it's actually our loss for we learnt a little less. I felt bad right away.

Researcher: Which way do you like?

Joyce: I think supervision is necessary, for we are fundamentally lazy after all. The students are likely to pay more attention when the teachers emphasise something repeatedly.

(Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

Joyce expressed her expectation on teachers' supervision, due to her previous learning experience or personal habit, however, she had been one of the top students in her class. On the other hand, Tracy, from the same school struggled throughout her master's study. She had a bad relationship with her roommate, suffered from loneliness, homesickness and severe procrastination. She was so stressed from her assignments in the end of each semester, juggling her daily life, travelling and working on a few essays by herself, that she had the thought of committing suicide a few times. Taking my suggestion, she went to seek help from the school counselling service, but the available appointments were limited so she was assigned a counsellor after she had already handed in the assignment, therefore she no longer needed one. She eventually managed to finish the master's study, however, the whole process was full of pain, and she felt very helpless. Her case discussed below may not be representative but could offer us an insight into a student's struggle into the autonomous higher education learning environment in this Scottish master's programme.

As described in the previous section, when contacting the new learning environment, Tracy was holding an open mind to the idea of critical thinking and appreciated the opportunity to practise in the UK learning environment, so she was able to think independently. Furthermore, she also actively responded to her procrastination, which according to her only revealed itself in her master's study for some reason, so that she became an expert of the theories of the self-control and time-management. She studied all the factors that may contribute to procrastination and how to adjust oneself to a more reasonable daily routine to make the most of the time. She also showed me a series of apps on her phone during the interview that in theory may help her control her life and study. However, none of the knowledge or tools prevented her from falling apart when the deadline approached in the end of each semester. Here I will describe the first deadline she faced with three essays below.

In the first semester, following the theories she studied about self-motivation and the suggestions about essay writing, she planned to start writing the three essays more than a month ahead of the deadline and had a holiday booked right after the submission as the stimulation and self-reward. However, there was a flaw in her plan, as she said: "I had a great plan, but plan doesn't necessarily lead to the action." When the deadline was approaching, she became desperate and helpless, facing the impossible assignments, so for the first time in her life, the idea of suicide slipped into her mind, and it scared herself as well.

Tracy: We had three essays to hand in, about 10k words. I started preparing for them quite early. I read a lot. It was very time-consuming, but I didn't find much useful materials, neither could I organise my thoughts or get them on the writing. So a month just slipped, and I realised I didn't have a single draft by the booked travelling time. I was extremely anxious and felt depressed. When I was on top of the hill or a bridge,

anywhere high, the idea of jumping off flashed my mind, then I thought about my mom and how much it would strike her.

……

I felt useless. I had so much time. I had a month and a half, but I didn't write a single word. Although under such a pressure, I chose to hide from it like an ostrich. I must have been hallucinated that I felt I would be able to finish the 3 essays, 10k words, within 7 days when I travelled back. So I went to my holiday, and the problem was left to my future self, but of course the pressure was still strangling me even when I was having fun. When I came back from my holiday, my procrastination didn't just disappear. My daily routine and habit couldn't be changed in a day, no matter how much I wanted to conquer my problem. At last, I managed to hand in all the three essays, and without doubt they were rubbish being written in such a rush. I wrote one of the essays within a whole day and night. When it was 3 a.m., I was extremely exhausted, and I felt all the letters were twisted and flying around me. It was such a difficult topic that I was literally squeezing each letter out of myself until I was totally drained. I didn't manage to write enough words, so I failed hard. I was so desperate…I was always an optimistic person and suicide had never even flashed in my mind. I was always a Xueba (good student) until I came to UK. I'm now so useless and have somehow become a Xuezha (student scum). Although I wasn't making a great effort in my study, I still made some effort. I have achieved nothing in my study in UK, neither did I enjoy my life. My parents paid a great amount of tuition fee for me to study abroad. When I had another 1000 words to write for that essay until 5am and I knew I couldn't finish on time, my mind started to wander: what if I couldn't graduate? what if I couldn't get the certificate? how would I go home and face my family? So I had that thought again. (Tracy started to choke with tears).

(Transcript and translation from 2nd interview.)

Xueba and Xuezha are two student identities in opposite positions, commonly used to measure students' performance and even their values in schools in China.

Xueba: Literally means the study lord, which refers to the students who can always remain the top of the class.
Xuezha: Literally means student scum, which is the opposite to Xue Ba, referring to the students who have poor performance in the assessments. However, it does not necessarily involve students who have drug or drinking problems, or those who drop out from schools.

Tracy was not aware that she could have requested an extension until I told her in our second interview. She said she was willing to make the request if she knew it was an option. Thereafter, she requested the extension for her dissertation, twice, but it did not ease her stress as her procrastination had haunted her to the last minute. During our last interview, she told me she finally managed to hand in her dissertation but was yet to know the result. We lost contact after she went back to China, so I could not offer the end of the story, but I wish her the best.

Tracy was a good student since she was a child and she went to a high-ranked university for her undergraduate study where she remained the top of the class. In China, only the intelligent and diligent students could have access to those universities via the highly-competitive entry examination. However, she became a “student scum” after she enrolled in the master’s programme due to lack of self-control. The shift of her identity, from Xueba to Xuezha, is acknowledged by herself based on her assessment results and the learning process as Tracy’s learning experience was never as painful.

Tracy’s journey in autonomous learning is worth reflecting on. How did a previous top student become a “student scum” in the UK? Why was Tracy’s procrastination triggered during her study in the UK and how did it develop into such a severe situation? If we had intervened, would it have helped to control the situation? Unfortunately, these

questions are not easy to answer but I will consider her case further in the discussion chapter.

4.3.2.2 Students' negotiation with teachers/supervisors

Teachers' holding different education values and thus conducting a different teaching method in the new learning environment may in some contexts confuse students when the students are not clear what is and should be expected, both of themselves and of the teachers, especially under the pressure of the assessments. Taking essay writing for example, students need to make numerous decisions on essay topics, literature research, selections and referencing; furthermore, they are expected to use the teachers' feedback as suggestions rather than requirements, which means the students can feel alone in their decision making. However, although students were encouraged to make their own decisions and choose topics to their preferences, the marking criteria were not completely flexible – there was still a pattern to follow in terms of the format and structure of an academic essay and critical thinking was required to be demonstrated in the content. In the data, students often found the requirements challenging and insufficiently clarified. Therefore, they had to probe and explore the ways to meet the new requirements in order to pass the assessments. Some of the participants complained they were confused as sometimes the grades did not positively correlate with the efforts they put in or with the results they expected but there were barely chances for them to find out the reasons. Most of the time (especially in the first two semesters) the students' negotiation was silent and out of sight of the teachers.

When it came to the third semester, the interactions with teachers, i.e. dissertation supervisors, were more frequently discussed during the interviews as the relationship became more personal and interactive. In the data, different students with different

expectations and learning habits had vastly different reactions and different relationships with their supervisors. Some of the participants, for example Vivian from an engineering programme, succeeded to adapt into the new requirement, although she struggled to some extent at the beginning.

Vivian: I see my supervisor on a daily basis. S/he is very nice, very supportive. S/he offers immediate help or get someone to help me whenever I have any problem. But s/he is also quite open to my ideas. S/he asked me to decide what I want to do for my dissertation project, encouraged me to do whatever my ideas take me. This is why I was super stressed at the beginning of the dissertation stage. I don't know what I can do and I don't know where I can take it to. I know some of my classmates could just follow the lead of their supervisors, because their whole projects are already planned, but my supervisor is ok with every idea I come up with, and said, ok, you can try it.

Researcher: Has your supervisor said no to any of your ideas?

Vivian: No. S/he told me the purpose of the project was to stimulate my creativity.
(Transcript and translation from 2nd interview.)

Fortunately, Vivian did not panic for long. Soon she had a plan then polished and adjusted it continually in the laboratory practice. She had a successful dissertation project and both herself and her supervisor were very pleased. In the last interview after the dissertation submission, Vivian expressed her appreciation for the time and space given during the dissertation stage to develop her thoughts and skills as an engineer and once again complimented on her supervisor for being extremely helpful.

Vivian: S/he gave me the sense of safety and gave me access to a great amount of availability, so I could get the most of my study. (Transcript and translation from 3rd interview.)

4.3.2.2.1 Supervisor being too gentle

The majority of the participants, like Vivian, reported their supervisor was helpful and supportive during their dissertation stage. However, due to values and cultural differences, many participants had difficulties having negotiation with their supervisors. Joyce had difficulties communicating with her supervisor in terms of the feedback on her dissertation writing. She indicated that her supervisor was not giving clear feedback, but she was hesitating to ask.

> Researcher: What do you think about your supervisor?
> Joyce: Pretty good. S/he gives me feedback and comments, but unlike a Chinese supervisor, s/he doesn't tell me where I need to make changes. I feel her/his opinions are not very clear. S/he always uses I would like….if I were you rather than tell me directly where the mistakes are in my writing, or whether it is good and why. S/he only tells me what s/he would do. I feel the feedback is too vague. I still don't know what to do and whether what I'm doing is right or wrong.
> ……
> For example, s/he suggested that I could read some books of Sociology and learn the proper figure of speech to present my research methods. I did but not sure what I'm looking for. The books didn't tell me which ones are proper in my research context. I'm very confused. Is the figure of speech in my writing wrong or do I just need to enhance the accuracy? (Transcript and translation from 2nd interview.)

There may be mismatching expectations between the supervisor and the student in this case. Joyce was hoping the supervisor could point out which part of her writing is right or wrong and how to make changes in detail. Her supervisor, on the other hand, was giving modest suggestions and may have expected the student to explore, probe and make decisions, which, contrary to the supervisor's original intention, caused the student's confusion and insecurity.

Rachael also found supervisor meetings and feedback were stressful to her rather than useful.

> Rachael: I don't like meeting with my supervisor because it just brings more work to do. Whenever I asked a question, s/he just threw at me more readings. If I had the time to read, I didn't even need to ask her/him the question! I have enough to do and I'm under a lot of pressure already.
> ……
> I think the teachers here are very polite, or rather they tend to speak in a very mild tone, so it's difficult to tell what they really mean.
> ……
> Like when my supervisor gave me deadlines for each of my chapter drafts, s/he said: "Are you happy with this plan?" I was surprised! Does it mean the plan is negotiable?
> ……
> I hope my supervisor can be stricter and speak to me in a more severe tone, like: You shouldn't be travelling during your dissertation time because you probably can't finish on time! Otherwise I don't feel so guilty when I'm procrastinating.
> ……
> I'm still exploring and trying to match the different tones with how serious the situation is. Do you know how they normally convey strictness? What wording do they use?
> (Transcript and translation from 2nd interview.)

Joyce's and Rachael's comments may surprise some of the educators believing in the Western education values, which emphasises the respect of students' decisions and leaving them space to probe and stretch, meanwhile students also need to take the consequences as part of the learning, or as some may call it the necessary pain. However, students sometimes may need a stronger and more formative instruction rather than suggested opinions from the supervisor especially under the assessment

pressure. Furthermore, some students would welcome more strictness to scaffold their behaviour as too many choices and too much freedom may bring them more stress. After all, the master's study is only one year, during which the Chinese students had to face so much new. Some may not afford to go through the necessary pain within such a short time.

4.3.2.2.2 Supervisor being controlling

The majority of the students explained that teachers in China tended to be more controlling over their work than in the UK but there was one exception. Minnie, from the School of Education, felt that her supervisor in the UK took more control and even though she did not always agree, she felt she had to acquiesce because the supervisor marks her writing.

Minnie:	Communication with my supervisor is not so easy during the meeting due to her/his strong accent. But I feel embarrassed to say Pardon? Pardon? all the time, especially when s/he was explaining to me in such a passion. I could basically get the gist of it though. I think my supervisor's advantage is that s/he is very straightforward, but s/he is also pretty controlling. S/he always makes me feel that "my way is right and you should follow it".
Researcher:	So you feel s/he is not offering suggestions or asking for your opinions.
Minnie:	S/he sometimes says "It's up to you" at the end of her/his suggestion, but I could feel that s/he is just being polite. …… I think what s/he said made sense. Also, s/he will mark my dissertation. If her/his suggestion is reasonable and s/he is going to mark my work, I wouldn't go against her/him. Why bother? (Transcript and translation from 2nd interview.)

April, from an engineering programme on the other hand, appreciated her supervisor's control and support, however she may have needed more than support.

Researcher:	Have you got a clear idea about your dissertation project?
April:	Yeah, I've got a topic already and a timeline. My supervisor had them planned for me.
Researcher:	What do you need to do? Experiment?
April:	Oh, no, I need to contact some companies for the data then I will need to build a model based on the data.
Researcher:	Do you have a clear plan for your project? Like a short-term target every month before August?
April:	Yeah, my supervisor had it arranged. S/he is so nice to me. …… I think my supervisor is so wonderful. S/he's probably the nicest teacher of the city. …… S/he is very chatty. S/he talked a lot during the supervisor meetings rather than asking me to speak a lot. I like this style, as my English is not so good, and I still struggle when I have to talk for a long time. During our meetings, s/he was speaking most of the time, to introduce and explain a lot of information to me. (Transcript and translation from 2nd interview.)

April felt protected and secured, due to her supervisor's specific arrangement for her research project at the beginning. However, she ended up very short of time to finish writing up her dissertation due to extensive procrastination throughout the third semester and was still finalising the writing up with only hours prior to the deadline.

Students' struggles in their study, such as making decisions, practising critical thinking and self-control are necessary as they are part of the journey. While Minnie was partially forced to follow her supervisors' suggestions, April happily took everything that was readily arranged for her. Both the students achieved the requirement of the

dissertation and finished the project, but had a part missing. As the struggles are necessary and what they could have gained during this process may be equally important to finishing the dissertation. However, we also need to acknowledge that a student sees a different picture than a teacher, as they may get lost in the process and could not see the end of the struggle and may never get to the positive result from the process. Therefore, the teachers' responsibility in facilitating learner autonomy of the masters' students are particularly challenging as sometimes when the teachers finally persuaded the students the struggle is necessary and helpful, the students may not have enough time to walk in a wrong direction and come back to see what they have achieved.

4.4 Peer support and pressure

This section presents an unexpected finding as to the surprise of a majority of the participants, their peers play an equally and sometimes even more important role in their study and life in the UK. They not only provide timely support for each other, filling the blank left by the teachers, they also keep one another company because they are fighting the same battle.

4.4.1 Better university, better peers.

Many of the participants reported that they relied on their peers to a certain extent in various aspects, like exchanging opinions, mutual support both academically and in daily life, and companionship during the transition.

> Minnie: I'm surprised how much help I can get from my peers. I never thought of the necessity to learn from my classmates. I

doubted whether what they knew and said made sense. Now I believe I need them. What I can learn by myself is definitely not enough.

Researcher: Now do you believe what they know and say sort of make sense?

Minnie: I can learn a lot from them. Like last time we did that workshop together and we were exchanging ideas and experience. When we were doing the poster together, I thought wow, they had so many ideas I didn't think of. They are really helpful.

(Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

This is not a unique case. Another student expressed her feelings that the admission of the postgraduate programme filtered out those who were not advanced enough either financially or in their current capacity for higher education learning. Therefore, the students who had gained the entry tickets were generally more respectful people. They cherish and strive to get the most from the new learning environment.

Dora: I feel the students who are able to study abroad generally have a better quality. First of all, the admission was acting like a filter, for example, we needed to get 7 in IELTS as part of the admission requirement. Secondly, we are all from relatively wealthy families, who could at least afford the cost of the tuition and living, and we are well educated from the family, so we are respectful people. This is how I feel. We listen when other students are speaking and show respect to their opinions, also encourage and give compliment when they have good ideas. We help each other and form a positive learning environment. But it's not always the case in China. There were all kinds of students, who only wanted to make the minimum effort to get a degree. Sometimes when I wanted to create a nice atmosphere, speaking English to my peers, I only got excluded for they believed I was pretentious. Now studying abroad, I asked my Chinese flatmates to speak English to me, and she was ok with it. We know what we are here for. We paid massive amount of money to get here. We

are more motivated.
(Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

Dora is from a TESOL programme and due to the nature of the programme, the language requirement is very high. IELTS band 7 is a demanding barrier for any non-native speakers, from my professional opinion as an IELTS teacher, and achieving it requires not only students' diligence and intelligence, but also the resources for a long-term English language exposure, especially for English speaking practices. Dora demonstrated a very high English level during our interview for she chose to speak English in the first interview to increase her time of practice, (although we switched to Mandarin in the second half to achieve a better communication). However, in the second interview, after a few months, she told me she was frustrated due to a lack of English proficiency, which I will illustrate in section 4.5.3.

Dora's "theory" of filter may provide an aspect to explain why some of the Chinese students started to value their peers. They may have acted so due to a higher motivation of making initiative contact resulting from the massive fees their family had paid; or they may have found their peers generally with better capacity than previously and easier to work with. As in the interviews, the participants did not specify the nationality of their peers, it is inappropriate to assume the phenomenon exists only among the Chinese students, that is to say those participants may have also found their non-Chinese peers very helpful, although Dora and Minnie are both from programmes with 80-90% Chinese international students. Furthermore, due to the nature of the research, only Chinese international students were recruited and interviewed, I am not aware if any non-Chinese students had the same feelings about their peers.

Some other participants also reported their adjustment in terms of working with their

peers, which interestingly showed similarity with the phenomenon I mentioned above. For example, Flora and Jack, who are the main characters in the case studies, also expressed that they used to be the top student among their peers but realised their classmates in the new learning community were more competent and helpful, (please refer to the case study chapter for details).

4.4.2 Peer support

4.3.2.1 Peer support in classroom discussions

As I mentioned in 4.2 TLA section, group discussion was identified as one of the new teaching and learning activities in the new environment to a large extent by the participants from the School of Education, although some mentioned they had such classroom activities in their undergraduate study in China, but not as frequently. Participants from science and engineering programmes were asked the questions regarding the same issue, but according to their understanding, discussion did not and should not happen as often in their classroom as in the social science programmes. However, they also benefited from their peers through study groups, which I will discuss in the next section.

It was generally shown in the data that the participants from the School of Education largely accepted, some enjoyed and even preferred the classroom discussion as part of the teaching-learning methods. For example, Mary, from an education programme, stated that she was very nervous speaking in front of the class and the teacher's presence could only intensify it. However, she was willing to express her ideas in the group discussion,

Researcher: Do you express your thoughts in the group discussion?
Mary: Yeah, because when I talk about my ideas to the group, my classmates could make supplement for my opinions and correct me if I'm wrong. Also, my ideas may make contribution to the group discussion.
(Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

Another participant, Jane, also expressed that she was surprised by how helpful her peers could be and attributed this discovery to the extensive chances in the classroom for the students to exchange their ideas and thereby to develop their own thinking ability and understanding.

Jane: I think my classmates are very valuable. I didn't think so before because my classmates barely spoke (in my previous learning experience), I mean in the classroom. In a typical Chinese classroom, it's always the case that the teacher does the talking and the students study. I couldn't hear other people's opinions, only the teachers'. But now everyone gets to talk about their ideas, every group presents their ideas. We have students from different countries, with different perspectives and thoughts. The more diverse the cultures are, the more ideas we could generate.
Researcher: Do you express your ideas as well?
Jane: Yeah, whatever ideas I have, I talk about it.
Researcher: Was it the same case before?
Jane: No, I didn't have many chances to talk about my opinions in my undergraduate study. I sometimes raised my hand, but rarely. Now we are doing the discussion. Discussion is not only speaking, it's also a process of thinking, to talk about what you just thought of. It's not like after the teacher say something, we raise our hands. I always feel raising hands is weird.
Researcher: Did you have group discussions before?
Jane: Basically not. We had group tasks sometimes, so the discussion we had was to allocate small tasks. We didn't have group discussions to simply talk about our thoughts in certain topics.

(Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

Francis, on the other hand, from a Science programme, commented that the teaching methods in his learning experience in both UK and China are teacher-dominated, that is to say, the students had few chances to make plans, decide the learning outcome of each session or to discuss their opinions in the classroom. However, he mentioned there are some tutorials in the first semester that are new to him, for the opportunities to exchange ideas with his peers via discussion or finishing homework together, i.e. finding solutions for certain tasks.

> Francis: I can't say it's very obviously helpful, but it helps to know how other students solve the same problem, their thoughts and approaches. So next time when I face a similar problem, I may have more than one solution.
> (Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

Francis described himself as a learner who was highly self-driven and preferred to study by himself, which was also his learning habit during the undergraduate study. From his narratives, he was also used to living and traveling alone. The tutorials expanded his perspectives, however to a limited extent due to the language barrier.

> Francis: But it's quite a challenge to me. I usually sit with native (English) speakers and sometimes I can't quite understand what they say. I try very hard to express myself and make myself understandable, but it doesn't work all the time. The communication might be a problem.
> (Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

The language barrier is, to some extent, the most fundamental obstacle to Chinese international students to be engaged in the teaching and learning activities, which will be discussed further in the following section 4.5 Are Chinese students silent and passive

in the classroom. However, in Francis's case, it did not stop him, instead, he chose to increase the contact with native speakers for more practice, because like many Chinese students, language exposure is one of the important reasons for him to study in the UK.

4.3.2.2 Peer support for assignments and assessments

Some of the participants along with their friends and classmates, managed to organise study groups in order to cope with assessments. For example, in the case study chapter, I will describe the collaboration in Flora's study group and how it had affected the development of her social ability. In study groups, students met regularly or upon request for discussions, reading one another's essay drafts and giving feedbacks. The groups were proved to be successful for they largely led to satisfying assessment results, although most of these groups were temporary and drifted apart when the members had different courses. One of the groups, from my research, lasted throughout the whole year master's study, which I will illustrate in the next section – 4.4.3 collective transition.

Participants from both science and social science programmes reported frequent and effective peer collaborations during their study, but in different ways, due to the nature of their disciplines. At the School of Education, for example, students tended to help each other via discussions in order to construct the structure of an essay or to exchange understandings of certain theories, while students from engineering or science programmes usually shared their solutions to assignment tasks with their peers or helped each other solve mathematical or programming problems. In the case study Flora's story 5.3.2.1, I will give an elaborate account of a study group that worked together to cope with an assessment. The example I am listing in the following is a particular case where the change of the peer support method in the new learning

environment contributed to a science student Tanton's development of learner autonomy.

Because the nature of the research was not aiming to compare Chinese international students and home students or students from other countries, I did not ask each participant to specify what nationalities their peers were when they talked about peer collaboration. Tanton reported in the first interview that he found the non-Chinese students in his programme had a different way to respond to his request, in regarding to the daily assignment. It's a turning point for him, and he had no choice but adjust himself under the pressure of the deadline.

> Tanton: I found that the non-Chinese students didn't understand what I was really asking for. It seemed they didn't understand I was aiming for the answers. I even felt they were trying to avoid letting me know their answers.
> (Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

To Tanton, he was confused and struggled to adapt because he was used to relying on his classmates to help him with assignment in his undergraduate study.

> Tanton: I am used to relying on others to give me some instructions or at least an icebreaker to start with. I have big difficulties starting anything. I need people to give me the first step, otherwise it'll take me ages to move forward. I think I'm lacking the ability to solve problems independently. No matter how much the first step could actually help, I just need this icebreaker.
> …
> Even when I had a clue and sort of knew where to start with, I still felt I might be wrong and preferred to check first with my classmates.
> …

It can be my classmates or my teachers, or anyone. Before I came here, I could always find someone.
(Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

However, in the new learning environment, not only the non-Chinese students, but also the Chinese students no longer provided the direct help.

Tanton: I just feel my classmates would prefer to help me figure it out myself rather than giving me the answer. They would like to remind me of some specific teaching content, or even help me probe for potential solutions but they are not willing to tell me how to do it.
(Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

Therefore, Tanton had to learn to break the ice on his own, although he felt he was forced to make such an adjustment.

Tanton: I'm forced to conform now. The deadline is right there. I have to find a solution myself. I don't have a choice… Even when I wasn't sure about my answers upon the submission, had to brave out.
…
This is a forced adjustment, not a proactive one. Deadline is the motivation.
Researcher: Why do you think the Chinese students had such a change?
Tanton: I think maybe they are also not sure about their answers, nobody is. Also, I guess they are worried if we have the same answer, it may cause a plagiaristic problem.
(Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

In contrast to the previous learning community, where, according to Tanton, students copied or revised experiment result to fit the right answer, in Tanton's master's study in the UK, both students and teachers were taking assignments and plagiarism seriously. As a result, students tended to offer help to one another more carefully without

probing the school rules, and taking the teachers' guiding method, as discussed at 4.2.2, became an ideal solution.

Unlike many students feeling necessary to be autonomous in the absence of the teachers, in an either proactive or reactive manner, Tanton started the journey as a result of the changed approach of peer support in the new learning environment. Tanton showed struggle to the new approach of peer support in the first interview but it was no longer a problem in our following contacts. In his dissertation stage, he demonstrated competence and ability to make decisions and solve problems independently. If we compare the three card-rankings (Figure 6-8), we could clearly see the card "clear instruction" disappeared at the last time when Tanton believed he was no longer a student, but someone who was ready to apply his knowledge into either his work practice or the PhD study.

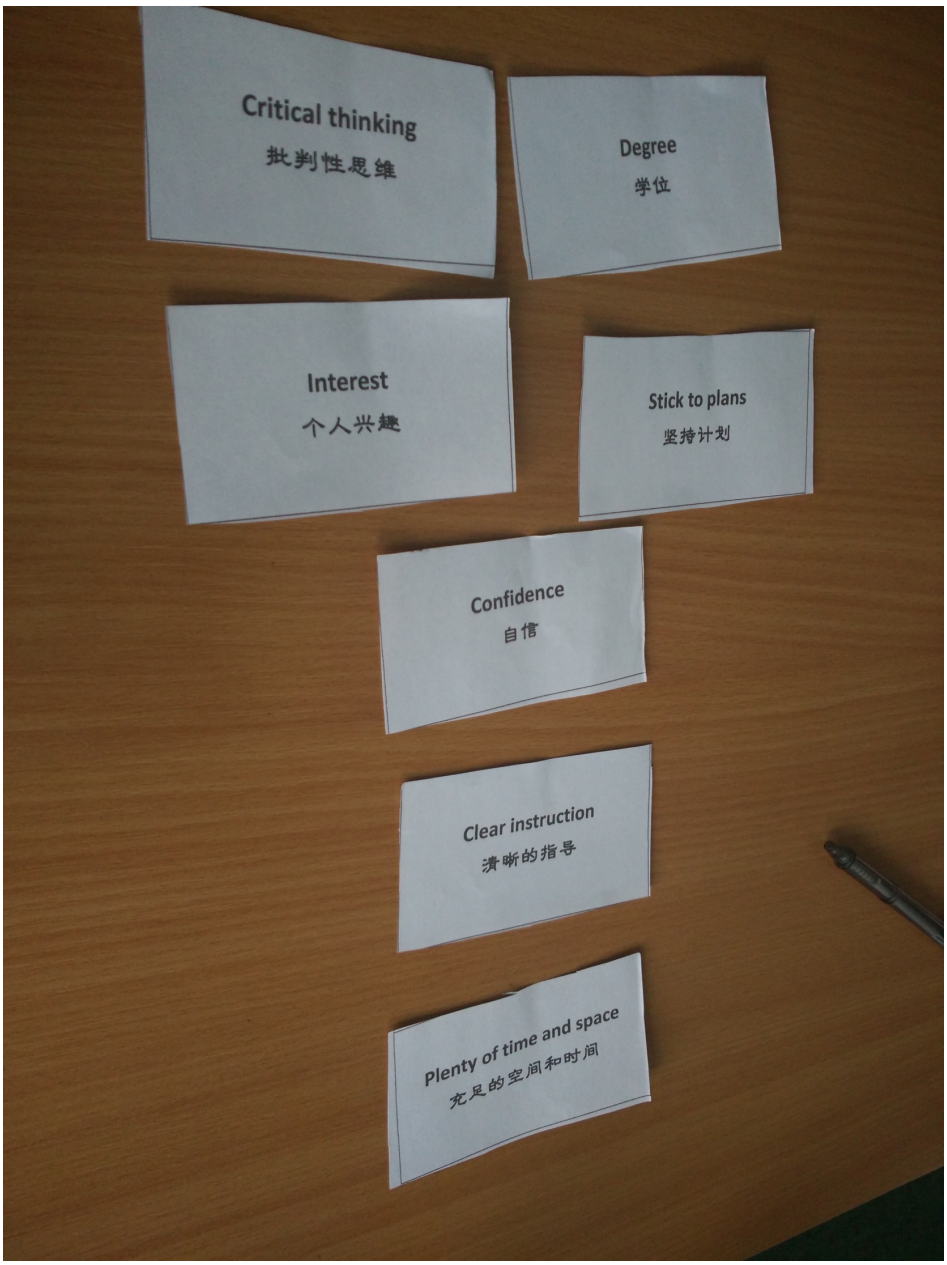

Figure 6 Tanton, 1st interview, 9th November 2016

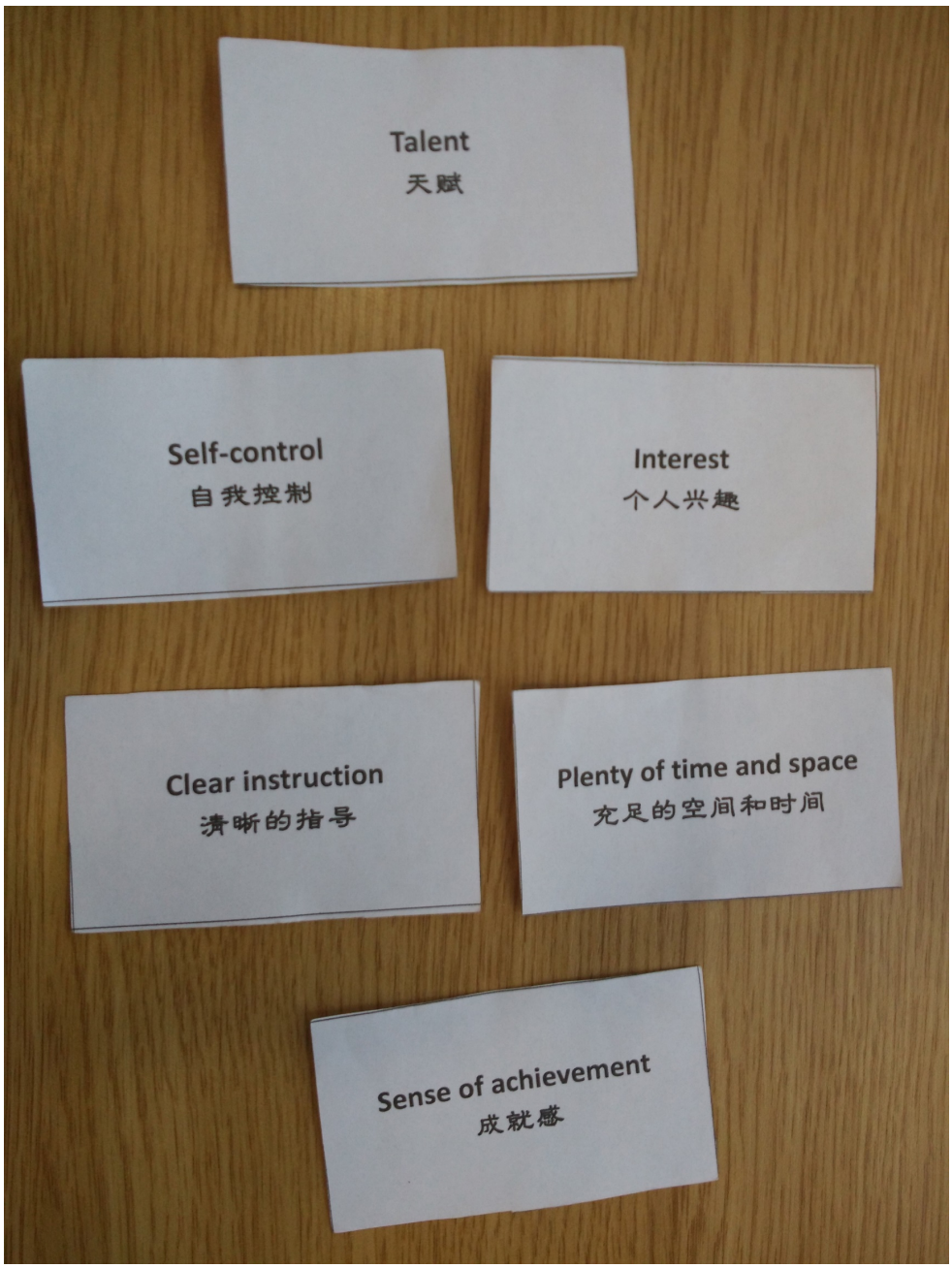

Figure 7 Tanton, 2nd interview, 20th May 2017

Figure 8 Tanton, 3rd interview, 28th August 2017

4.4.3 Collective transition – case study

One of the participants, Joyce, reported a successful group, consisting of four Chinese girls, experiencing the transition together from flying to UK from China to the submission of the dissertation. I was not able to gather all the members to have a focus group, because by the time I interviewed Joyce and learnt about this long-lasting group, the other group members had already left the UK. Fortunately, Joyce was willing to explicitly describe how the group worked from a critical perspective.

Many Chinese students, before the trip abroad, use online social media to contact those who are going to the same universities, and can even find some enrolled in the same programmes. They sometimes organise group trips to fly together so that they can take care of one another and to keep company. Joyce met the other girls online for they were all enrolled in the same programmes, so they started the journey of transition together before they started their study in UK, after all, a new life in a foreign country is the first challenge they need to face.

4.3.3.1 Group activities

The girls experienced a lot of firsts in this new country together, for example, opening a bank account, registering at police station and GP, making the first contact with the school facilities and applying for a Schengen Visa, etc. The largest problem, according to Joyce, was usually the language barriers, but with four people listening, communicating and sharing information, the process was easier. Furthermore, to Joyce, living in a foreign country was no longer full of loneliness and helpless moments: the girls spent almost every Friday night to either cook together or dine out, to talk about their lives, study, difficulties and share some laughter; they called for group meetings when facing deadlines to discuss about their lecture content or an essay outline, etc.; they also travelled together to Europe and around UK a few times. Not everyone attended every group activity every time, but they were always there for each other and they strived to help each other with all the resources they have.

Researcher:	What difficulties in your life have you experienced here?
Joyce:	Language is always a problem, especially when I'm ill. I never needed to describe my syndrome in English when I was ill. I really don't know how to speak to a GP, so I'd rather staying at home. What strikes me the most was once I was seriously

ill and had to stay in bed for quite a few days. One of my friends' parents are doctors and suggested some pills according to my syndrome, I tried, and they worked, so I continued.

Researcher: So basically, your friends could solve all your problems.

Joyce: Yeah. They also brought me food and took good care of me during those days. I think I'm really lucky.

(Transcript and translation from 3rd interview.)

4.3.3.2 Reasons for the success of the group

There are many complicated reasons for this group to stay together throughout the EAP courses plus the whole academic year, standing out among other social or study groups I have contacted in the research. Through our discussions during the interviews, especially in the last one, Joyce expressed she was lucky, but could not explain what fundamentally constituted the success of the group. If I may conclude our discussions and make the best guess, I would say her good luck stems from the common ground and the well-maintained balance among the group members.

The four girls are from the same part of China with similar dialects and taste in food, furthermore, they have their courses and assessments in common and share the same purpose of their studies. Building on top of the common ground, they were committed to face problems and challenges together. Meanwhile, their friendship and companionship are rather interdependent. That is to say, they are four independent individuals with full respect for one another's decisions and space, and no one in the group is particularly reliant or makes compromises more frequently than others. Each member plays a critical but different role in the group. For example, Joyce is the calm and quiet one, so she tended to be the one ending a far-drifted discussion and pushing it to a group decision. A slightly older girl, who Joyce believed was the most influential

one to her during this one-year study, played a role as a sweet big sister, lightening the mood or organising group trips.

Joyce's group transition experience had my envy and admiration. In the contrary to my helpless and struggling moments during the first year in the UK for my master's study, Joyce could not recall any significant difficulties she felt stuck, because the group was always facing them together. However, Joyce also realised the shortcomings of the group transition. This is discussed in the coming section.

4.3.3.3 Disadvantages of collective transition

In responding to my admiration for the group and the companionship, Joyce mentioned there were also drawbacks. For example, she believed she had limited development in her capacity to deal with multiple pressures after the 1.5 years spent in the UK, due to the protection of the group. She drew this conclusion after comparing herself with one of her Chinese female friends who had spent the same amount of time in the USA alone. Her friend had been constantly forced to deal with all the problems from both her study and life by herself, while Joyce could retain her choices to stay in her comfort zone, and occasionally preferred to avoid the confrontation when someone in the group could stand up for the problem.

> Joyce: I think staying in a group has both advantages and disadvantages. I tend to be relying on my group, so my growth during this year is not as obvious, because I don't have to do everything or face everything new by myself. I have a very close friend studying in the US. She is the only Chinese student in her programme. She really has to carry everything on her shoulder, dealing all the problems by herself. I think now she is more mature than me, more

> independent. Like when I face a problem, the first thing I think of is asking for help, but she would be like, it's nothing, I'll manage.
> (Transcript and translation from 3rd interview.)

4.5 Are Chinese students silent and passive in the classroom?

In the literature review chapter, I discussed the stereotype in some previous literatures that Chinese international students tend to be quiet in the classroom discussion and they seemingly prefer to accept the knowledge in a passive way. As a Chinese international student, I do not completely agree, therefore, I particularly asked the participants in the interviews to describe how they responded to the classroom activities such as group discussions and presentations, and what held them back if they were not involved as often as the students from other countries. The results are interesting and highly diverse. I try to summarise three reasons to explain the "passive" appearance of the Chinese students, and also what they say demonstrates that they are neither quiet nor passive.

4.5.1 Cultural tendencies

Participants have various understandings in terms of this topic. For example, Jack thinks that Chinese students tend to stay a low profile in public. He feels that the Chinese students are generally not encouraged to be active in every aspect in the Chinese education environment for active students may be excluded by their peers.

Mary also agrees that Chinese students are quieter. In her case, she does not like to talk about her ideas unless she is fully prepared, however, there are many other factors affecting her willingness to speak.

Mary: I feel Chinese students tend to be quieter than the non-Chinese, who do the talking most of the time. Of course it's just my general impression. I'm not saying the Chinese students never speak. They are probably like me, just hesitating to speak in front of the class.

Researcher: What if when you are fully prepared?

Mary: It kind of also depends on the whole atmosphere. If everyone was super active, it's a little embarrassing not to say anything. But if everyone was quiet, I would prefer to hold it even when I had something I wanted express.

(Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

What stopped Mary from expressing her opinions was her lack of courage to speak in public rather than lack of ideas. She did not passively accept the knowledge, instead, she felt the expectation on her to make contributions by sharing her opinions, and would like to do so, however her willingness was restricted to the group discussion without the teachers' presence.

Mary: Sometimes in the classroom discussion, some students would add their opinions on top of another student' after s/he expressed her/his thought. I would never do that. It's too scary.

…

I may raise my thoughts in a small range group discussion, but definitely not in front of the whole class. I'm just too nervous to speak in front of many people. Group discussion is after all only with my classmate. Classroom discussion involves the teacher listening!

Researcher: So the teacher's presence is another source of pressure for you.

Mary: Yeah, makes me more nervous.

Researcher: If the teacher were standing next to you when you were in the group discussion, would you rather stay quiet?

Mary: It depends, but when the teacher approached, it would make me very nervous and forget what I wanted to say.

Researcher: Why do the teachers make you so nervous.
Mary: I don't know.
Researcher: Do you think the teachers here are too serious?
Mary: Not really. I don't know why I got nervous.
(Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

Tanton also offered his reasons not to ask questions during the class.

Tanton: My habit is I always do some research before I ask the teachers. I think subconsciously I always worry it might just be something I didn't understand due to the language barrier. I don't want to embarrass myself by asking a stupid question in the classroom.
Researcher: Are you afraid of being laughed at?
Tanton: It's not a big deal being laughed at. The thing is I'm not a child anymore, like when I was in high school. I'm already a postgraduate student, an adult. I think I should be more meticulous. I shouldn't just ask any questions. Also I'm afraid that people might laugh at me. That's also part of the reason.
Researcher: What about the other Chinese students in your class?
Tanton: I haven't seen any Chinese students asking stupid or unnecessary questions so far.
Researcher: What about students from other countries?
Tanton: I couldn't really understand some of the questions they asked. Based on what I could understand, some of the questions they posed were so easy that I could even answer for the teacher. I think foreign students really ask anything, but after all they only have one thing to worry about, the meaning of the theory rather than the sentences. At least they wouldn't have misunderstanding because of the language barrier. However, we always worry that maybe we couldn't understand the theory because we had trouble understand the literal meaning, or we just made a mistake translating certain concept, so we couldn't relate it to our existing knowledge. We have many things to worry about, so we wouldn't ask questions straight away when we have anything we are not sure.
(Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

If I may summarise the reasons for Chinese students to appear quiet, although we could see how complicated the case is, I would highlight two main aspects: the personal tendency to speak in the public and the language barrier. Furthermore, there is seemingly a kind of threshold that decides when and whether some of the Chinese students would speak, which I would like to unfold further in the following section.

4.5.2 Thresholds

From the previous discussion and the transcripts, especially in Mary's and Tanton's cases, it is likely that there is a threshold for some of the Chinese students to speak, depending on how prepared they are and whether they think what they are about to say or ask is stupid. In the case study chapter, Rachael also mentioned "*I only speak when I'm confident that what I'm about to say is above a certain level".* However, the teachers are always encouraging and responded positively to the students' opinions, meanwhile the non-Chinese students frequently speak about their "stupid" opinions or ask "unnecessary" questions, the atmosphere became gradually relaxed. For example, Rachael, in her last interview, mentioned about her adaptation to the classroom discussion and was able to express her opinions freely in public at the end of the second semester. In fact, speaking in public acted as a way for her to practise having a voice, which may contribute to her citizenship development. Please refer to the chapter on Rachael's story for more details.

In Tanton's case, he admitted that the threshold or in his words, preparation, is the key to his confidence to speak or ask questions in the public, even when the language barrier is conquered. This is in his nature and he was not planning to, or under any pressure, to change it in his new learning environment, at least until the time he was

interviewed.

Researcher: Do you think when you have basically conquered the language barrier, you will ask the teachers questions during their teaching whenever there is anything you are not sure of or simply to add your opinions?

Tanton: I might ask questions when I'm more certain of my English ability, but I will never express my opinions and try to add it up to the teachers' teaching. I will need to do some research and make sure my thoughts make sense before expressing it in the public. To tell a premature idea to the teachers? I don't think so. If you ask me why, well I think it's in my nature. I think many Chinese students tend to be more careful. We usually need to prepare fully before we do anything. I know many Chinese students have to write down every sentence they are going to say before they do a presentation. That's not our notes for reading in the presentation, we are not allowed to read from notes. That's just part of the preparation.
(Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

4.5.3 Language barriers

As Tanton and many other participants mentioned, the language barrier is one of the greatest obstacles in their transition experience in both study and daily life.

Tanton: I think the language barrier is a fundamental problem to any non-native-speakers. It results directly to our carefulness and various concerns. Even when we have some good ideas we want to share in the classroom, then the teacher or other students continue the topic with a further discussion, there is a high chance we can't understand it. This is why we'd rather not raise the question.
(Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

Dora was one of the few that chose English rather than Mandarin to communicate during the first interview and demonstrated very fluent English-speaking skills and great pronunciation. From my English teaching experience, she must have made a great amount of investment, both financially and in terms of time in learning English. She also went to a summer camp for a couple of months in the US during her undergraduate study. However, in the second interview, she expressed her frustration at her feeling of incompetence in her English level, which resulted in her reluctance to express herself in the classroom discussion.

> Dora: My status might be different from the first time you interviewed me. I was quite confident back then, coming from the background of one of the top students in my undergraduate, but now I'm less confident. I tend to keep a low profile. I used to be talking a lot in the class, but after I came here, I felt I was so average. I really didn't understand or answer the questions. I simply couldn't get to the point. English is another issue. My English is actually pretty good, but still not as good as a native speaker. I also make a lot of mistakes in speaking and writing. I'm not saying I'm negative now, but really not as confident as in my undergraduate study.
> (Transcript and translation from 2nd interview.)

In 4.4 Peer support and pressure, Dora displayed a confident image in the first interview, ready to conquer all the obstacles in the new learning environment. However, a few months later, she was intimidated by the peer pressure and the demanding language requirement in terms of her daily classroom activities and assessments. She started to realise her limitations, due to being posited to a higher-level university platform, contacting more intelligent and competent people, according to her "filter theory" (please refer to 4.4.1 for details). Therefore, she became modest and had spent more time in reading the literatures for her essays and dissertation.

Ryan is from an engineering programme. The courses in the first semester were similar or closely related to what he learnt in his undergraduate study; however, it did not help him much in understanding the teaching because the courses were very difficult. Furthermore, some teachers' strong accents exacerbated the problem. The following transcript may be amusing and may exemplify an awkward communication for non-native speakers.

Ryan:	There are a few courses like xx I don't really bother to try to listen now during the lectures. I could understand when I study them myself in the tutorials but can't quite follow when the teachers are teaching.
Researcher:	Why?
Ryan:	Because of the teacher's accent. Like today, s/he was repeating X (a term) for a whole session. We were all very confused, didn't know what it meant.
Researcher:	Nobody asked?
Ryan:	No, because we thought it's just a new term we didn't know. Then after the session we asked the teacher: "What is X?" The teacher said:" X? no I said Y (another term the students are quite familiar with)." And we were all like "Ohhh".
Researcher:	So you all just sat through the whole session, confused.
Ryan:	Yeah. Well you can imagine we don't like her/his course so much and don't pay much attention when s/he's teaching. (Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

The teachers' delivery also had a huge impact on student's reactions. When students were not responding very actively, they may have simply not understood what was expected of them.

Ryan:	S/he (the same teacher) quite often asked us if we had any questions. We always said no, no, no, but actually we were not able to ask any questions.

Researcher: Why?
Ryan: Because we didn't understand, didn't know what to ask. The course is very difficult, and her/his teaching was also not very clear. It's basically quite difficult to grasp the main points. When s/he asked us questions, we were not sure what was expected of us or from what aspect we should answer the questions.
Researcher: So you didn't quite understand her/his questions.
Ryan: No, we didn't.
(Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

Some of the students conquered the language problem very soon after their programme started. For example, a handful of participants from both social science and science programmes expressed that language was no longer a problem as early as the first interview, only 1-2 months after the beginning of the first semester. However, the majority of the participants in this study struggled for a long time. For some, the language barrier may have stood between the teachers and the students throughout the one-year master's study.

4.5.4 Not silent or passive

From what was discussed above, I could barely see the image of a passive learner in the Chinese students, instead, there are so many examples where they strive to meet the new learning requirement, and develop their identities as an educator, a scientist, an engineer.

Minnie, for instance, depicted her adaptation process and her fondness for the respect and encouragement from the new environment.

Researcher: Do you like this kind of workshop discussion?

Minnie: I do. I really do. I feel respected. No matter what I say, the tutor always says that's a good point.
Research: Do you think the tutor might just be polite?
Minnie: Maybe. But I like the politeness. I have the confidence to speak now. When I was in China, the tutor just gave me the look, and I wouldn't dare to speak. That's one of the reasons, I didn't get so many chances to speak. Another reason is when I was speaking, all the students were looking at me and the tutor was also looking at me and corrected me when I made a mistake. But here, it's a lot freer. We go to a workshop just to discuss about an article. There isn't right or wrong. We just need to speak up.
Researcher: Do you feel there isn't right or wrong? Will you worry that you might misunderstand some part and embarrass yourself if you speak out loud?
Minnie: I still do but not so much now. I think the EAP experience and practice made me more confident.
(Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

Dora, even though she had language issues, also enjoyed the chance to express herself and with the encouragement of the teachers, she also redeveloped her self-confidence. As I mentioned in 4.3.1.2, she said "I am not just learning from the teachers, rather I'm exchanging my ideas with them."

Jane, on the other hand, had not shown the issues of language or threshold, and was highly active in the classroom discussion which was mentioned in 4.2.2. Furthermore, she cherished particularly the training of critical thinking during the classroom discussions and believed it outweighed the knowledge learned in the master's study. From her performance and response to the new pedagogy, Jane is neither passive nor silent in the classroom activities.

Researcher: Do you like to have these chances to talk about your ideas?
Jane: Talking about ideas is not the most important. What's more

important is you have a topic to think. I'm not the kind of person that often does thinking, but now there's a topic there and I have to. It's nice to do some thinking. Sometimes I can actually think of something good and share in the group.

Researcher: You could probably talk about it straight away, because it seems to me that you are quite good at expressing yourself.

Jane: Yeah, that's not a problem.

(Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

Jane: …the most important thing is not what level essays we could compose or how high we can achieve academically in this area, instead, it's our mind development, the ability of thinking and being critical. I don't think I personally will have any high achievement in academia or will ever become a scholar. So to me, it doesn't matter how much or what I've learnt here. What matters is the development of my thinking ability.

(Transcript and translation from 2nd interview.)

Lorraine also from School of Education was studying in a similar major in her undergraduate and thus had a lot of repeated learning content in the beginning of the master's study. She characterised her personality as nerdy, quiet and independent. She felt the pedagogies, i.e. lectures and workshops, were very similar in China and the UK and reported she did not feel necessary to make any adjustment in her way of learning apart from getting familiar with the English terms for the concepts she already knew. However, she was not very happy about the lectures in her master's study.

Lorraine: The workshops are very similar, but I don't understand why there are so many students in one lecture. I usually have to sit in the front because the back of the room can be quite noisy with so many students murmuring. It helps me concentrate sitting in the front and I can hear more clearly.

Researcher: Were there students murmuring at the back?

Lorraine: Yeah, like some students asked what the teacher was talking

about, they couldn't understand.
……

Researcher: How many students were there in one lecture?

Lorraine: 80 to 90. Sometimes when the teacher asked students to answer questions, we also couldn't hear the student. I really don't like this kind of arrangement, with so many students in one lecture. It's very different in my undergraduate. We had 20ish students in one lecture, so we had a lot more interactions with the teacher. The teacher could ask questions more frequently and the students were more willing to tell the teachers their ideas.

Researcher: Do you speak more or less often in the classroom now than before?

Lorraine: Pretty much the same. I would when I had something I wanted to say.

Researcher: Did you feel the pressure to talk in the classroom?

Lorraine: Not really. I think it's pretty good. After all, not everyone likes to learn via actively speaking and expressing their ideas. I am still engaged very much, via thinking and associating knowledge.

(Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

In Lorraine's eyes, it was not a matter of which nationality students being silent or passive, instead, the size of the lectures had constrained students' engagement and interaction. What is more important is that we should acknowledge every student has their own preferences in learning. Like Lorraine said, not everyone likes to be engaged by speaking. We should not draw a quick conclusion on students being passive because they were not talking, as there are many other ways to engage in the classroom. Fortunately, Lorraine's school in the UK was not stressing students to speak, which may have placed too much pressure on students with different learning preferences, language obstacles and threshold issues.

In this study, there are more examples to support the image of Chinese students being active and engaging learners in both classroom activities and daily study. In the case study

chapter, I will present three cases in which all the leading characters showed confidence, capacity and strong motivation to undertake the role as a student according to the values and requirements of Western education.

Chapter 5 Findings – Case Studies

As I mentioned previously, each participant had a distinct transition experience, so I have 19 fascinating stories to tell, however, given the limited length of this thesis, I have chosen the three cases which I felt were the most striking and illuminating accounts of transition. They are not all happy stories, some moments are even sad, full of struggle and negative emotions. I would like to invite my readers to think about how much effort the students had made to achieve their transitions, meeting the requirements of the new learning community, and their negotiation with both self and the Western world.

5.1 Rachael's story (Published at the HERDSA conference 2018, Adelaide)

I met Rachael during the workshop I organised at her school, through which I had a chance to approach the potential participants individually to invite them to the interviews. She gave me positive feedback on the workshop and agreed to meet me soon afterwards to have the first interview. We kept up a good relationship during her one-year of study in UK, as we shared a lot in common and had a better understanding of each other's situation and feelings. She trusted me and spared no effort to be responsive and offer thick description (Geertz, 1973) during the interviews. She appreciated my research for it recorded her precious experience in the UK from a different angle, so she also contacted me a month after she went back to China and told me her frustration in making the re-contact with the Chinese society, especially in job-hunting. The interviews and the contact with her provided rich data on her transition process.

Rachael was a teacher in China and decided to give up her previous life to pursue a master's degree in the area of Education in the UK for her career had reached

a bottleneck, as she was required to mimic a senior teacher and was not allowed to develop her own teaching methods and style. She felt this limited her personal development and working there was a waste of time. While many of her classmates were fully funded by their parents, moving on directly from undergraduate to postgraduate study, Rachael gave up her work in China, invested all her savings on this decision and thus expected an immediate and promising payback. Therefore, her adaptation process in the transition-in and transition-out were amplified due to her significantly higher expectations and motivation, leading to a more rugged and dramatic journey. The following account will show how she was overwhelmed by the disappointment and frustration at the beginning; and how she made the best from what was available in the new environment and developed her social responsibility and sense of citizenship. Furthermore, she was very sensitive to her new learning and living environment and provided rich description. She was also able to interpret her transition experience from her own understanding, which offers the story an insightful meaning from the participant's perspective.

I have a particular strong empathy for Rachael due to our similar experience. Rachael, in many ways is another me: she also gave up her comfortable life in China, invested everything she had for this degree, was frustrated at the beginning of her studies and managed to make adaptations. I believe I am in a better position to tell this story – how a mature student from an average-income family strived to make meaning of her study, learned to live with the much younger peers and achieved her aims. When representing and interpreting her story, I am also creating a self – a self that longs for the recognition of others, stemming from my mixed cultural experience and my experience. Therefore, the selection of the narratives from the interview transcripts is to convey a particular impression to the readers it is in my own interests to convey (Goffman, 1969). However, my readers must have different interpretations of the story, as meaning "arises out of a

process of interaction between people: self, teller, listener and recorder, analyst, and reader." (Riessman, 1993, p.15)

5.1.1 Rachael's resistance, disappointment, frustration and attempts to understand

Rachael had multiple identities upon entry to her new learning environment. She was first of all a teacher, therefore when she was learning at school, she was constantly comparing and reflecting on whether the teaching methods she learnt from the course could fit in her previous teaching context. Furthermore, she was a student who paid a massive tuition fee and had to live on her parents during her studies. She gave up her job and life in China, feeling guilty for leaving and living on her elderly parents and concerned about her aging and losing the privilege in the dating market in China when she went back after her study. Unavoidably, she had high expectations of the product she had paid a high price for but soon regretted her decision and started to consider whether she should drop out.

Rachael described her frustration and disappointment with her study experience in four main ways: 1) her failing to understand the reading, 2) tutors' poor delivery in teaching, 3) peer pressure in the classroom discussion, and 4) the unsuitable learning content. However, in her explanation, she might have had misguided expectations of the tutors and a misunderstanding of the tutors' expectations of the students.

1) her failing to understand the reading

Rachael: I thought the hand-outs must have been the key points in the assessment, otherwise why did the tutor hand them out. Also we have two reading lists for each session, essential and additional. I couldn't even understand the essential ones.

How am I going to pass the assessment? So I panicked.
(Transcripts and translation from 3rd interview)

Rachael was stressed at the beginning of the study because she was not familiar with the new learning and assessment system. She had no clue about how much effort was enough to pass the assessments or how much not knowing was still sufficient to survive in her study. She was hoping the tutors could help but soon found out it was not possible.

2) tutors' poor delivery in teaching

Rachael: I thought that the tutor was supposed to teach us so we could fully understand, but they apparently didn't. Then I thought I should give it another try for the second session, but I got even more confused. It was such a stressful time for me.
(Transcripts and translation from 1st interview)

To Rachael, the terminology of teaching means that it is the tutor's responsibility to make the delivery explanatory and detailed enough for the students to understand. However, she felt that the tutors were guiding the students to think instead. She could not completely blame the tutors because she was not sure what expectation she should have had on the tutors as a master's student, and she was not sure if the language barrier might be the reason for her confusion since many students with English as their mother language seemed to be more engaged and active in the classroom.

3) peer pressure in the classroom discussion

Not being able to be involved in the classroom discussion aggravated her stress and

self-blame. Speaking in the classroom and expressing personal opinions were apparently the new rules she had to live with, but it was difficult for her to respond to an English topic in such a short time, especially to prepare a contribution that was to her satisfaction.

Rachael:	The native speakers tend to express their thoughts freely, including the stupid thoughts. Chinese students, on the other hand, have a threshold, or maybe it's just me. I only speak when I'm confident that what I'm about to say is above a certain level. It takes time and when I was ready, the moment had passed, or I got distracted by some new ideas other students posed. We have some extremely active western students in the class. They have debates with the tutors all the time, even frequently interrupt the tutors. At the beginning, I was thinking: Hello, I'm here to listen to the tutor. How can you interrupt her/him? But, soon, I don't care anymore because the tutor doesn't really teach anything.
Researcher:	Are you disappointed?
Rachael:	No, I think the tutors play a different role here. They are certainly knowledgeable, but their purpose is to let us learn so they won't tell us too much, rather they guide us and expect us to think and respond.
Researcher:	Is the method effective to you?
Rachael:	It's ok. Well, I think I could present more of my thoughts in the writing now. It was more of absorbing and dealing with new information before, massive information, but now I'm reading with questions and just try to find the answers to these questions. There's no way I could finish the reading anyway. I don't know if it's a good method or not. (Transcripts and translation from 1st interview)

However, being silent does not mean having an empty mind. Rachael is actually a very active thinker and has opinions and perspectives on many issues. Given enough time, she is also not afraid of expressing herself. For example, at the beginning of the first semester, a tutor asked the students to have a discussion in the class and to question a

certain policy in the class. Instead of questioning the policy, she was questioning the task itself because she thought the discussion was unnecessary and pointless, based on what was available in her previous working context. Here I quote and translate Rachael's own description of her conversation with the tutor.

Rachael:	Why do I have to question something I don't care?
Tutor:	Why do you say so?
Rachael:	What difference does it make? What can I do? Questioning doesn't fit in the context in China.
Tutor:	It's not that it doesn't fit, it's because you haven't thought about how to change it.
Rachael:	Why do I want to change it?
Tutor:	You don't believe you can do anything maybe because you don't feel you have power.
Rachael:	Yeah, what power have I got? Policies are always made and changed by those who have the power.
Tutor:	The whole course is designed to help the students in Education Programme, the future educators to realise everyone has power and has the ability to make a change. (Transcripts and translation from 1st interview)

In terms of the tutor's perspective, Rachael had her doubts and still believed they were wasting time on meaningless practices, but she did not carry on the discussion with her tutor. But if we understand her previous working environment in China, we may understand why Rachael did not believe she had power and was not interested in policy making. During her work as a teacher in China, Rachael was not encouraged to make any professional decisions on her teaching, instead, she was usually assigned specific tasks by her supervisor and was required to follow the school rules to serve one purpose – helping the students achieve higher marks in the assessments.

Despite her doubts, the concept of power was successfully seeded and had grown and expanded unstoppably in her mind. By the last interview, which was conducted after

the submission of her dissertation, Rachael had developed a sense of a social self or rather citizenship with social responsibility and strong awareness of her power in society, which I will illustrate in the next section.

4) the unsuitable learning contents

Rachael could understand the tutors' guiding, the discussion activities required in the classroom, and the assignments were consistent and existed as a system, serving the purpose of encouraging the students to think and to connect the new information with the existing ones and thereby to apply it flexibly in practice. However, the three elements did not exist in line with Rachael's opinion. She could understand and try to adapt to thinking and expressing critically and representing ideas in the essays following the academic rules, which seemingly are what a master's study is all about. However, Rachael constantly felt what was taught and practised, i.e. many theories and the ability of challenging, questioning and discussing were not transferable when she was back to China. This made the stressful learning meaningless and she started to lose hope. However, she did not try to get help from her peers, tutors or the school counselling service. For her peers, she felt they could not understand her because they were generally younger and had no work experience, so they would not understand her situation and stress; for the rest of the potential support, she was hesitating because of language barriers.

She eventually decided to stay through the study and found that the only way to conquer those abovementioned problems is to neglect them and try to only focus on the positive side. For instance, she started to divert her focus from feeling sorry about the money she spent on every hour of school time to what she could gain from the new life she chose to live and stay. Therefore, she started to make friends and to enjoy her

life in this foreign country.

5.1.2 Rachael's adjustment and adaptation

If I may continue the story of Rachael's confrontation with her tutor in terms of the discussion of a policy, I would say her straightforward and sharp questioning of the task surprised me. From my culture, a tutor is generally considered as a superior and questioning them in the public could be an awkward conflict. From what I observed from Rachael's appearance and tone, she gave me the impression that she was a gentle and tender woman who would prefer to avoid such a confrontation. The later contacts proved that my initial guess was correct when she admitted that she started to express a lot of opinions in a direct manner only after she had arrived in this country. In line with my inference, she confirmed during the interview that she had never had any argument or expressed any discontent with her tutors in her undergraduate study in China.

It appears that the new affordances in the new environment released in her certain potentials and provided her opportunities to practice. For example, she found out that making a complaint for a purchase that is not to her satisfaction could easily lead to a compensation and an apology, however, she would rather not try the same back in China for the sake of saving her time and the trouble.

Furthermore, she started to accept and value the new teaching methods, or if I may quote Rachael's words, "guiding methods", and considered it as one of the most important attainment she had during her learning. Rachael was saying towards the end of the second semester that:

Rachael: I think the most important thing I've acquired here is that the teachers are pushing us to think all the time. But it's the change of thinking methods, not something I've learnt. It has huge impact on me.

Researcher: So you mean what you have acquired here is a new way of thinking rather than new information or knowledge.

Rachael: Yeah.

(Transcripts and translation from 2nd interview)

Another achievement she believed she had made was a significant change in her awareness of her role as a social being and her interactions with others, which I referred to as social responsibility and she agreed. At the last interview, when she had already handed in her dissertation, she was trying to sum up her achievements during the one-year of study in UK:

Rachael: I think I've become a more independent person, with many thoughts of my own. I used to be ok to follow others. Furthermore, I realised my previous life and behaviour in China were mainly decided by the context and environment I used to live in.

Researcher: It feels like you've developed further awareness and understanding of yourself.

Rachael: Yes. For example, sexist and racist. Before I didn't realise language could be so powerful. I've also paid more attention to politics, the difference between the social systems in China and in other countries. Also I rarely noticed any effect language could bring before. I thought it didn't matter. Now I would be more careful of what I'm about to say.

Researcher: I think you sort of have developed a sense of social responsibility. What do you think?

Rachael: Yeah, I think so.

Researcher: It feels like you start to care about what role you are playing…

Rachael: Yes! My role in the society. Like before I wouldn't care about the right to vote. I thought well I wasn't a candidate, why would I care? Now I feel, my voice is not heard, and my voice is important. I reflect on people in the history of modern

China trying to make their voices heard and on why it didn't change anything and what if it succeeded. I wouldn't think deeply when I was reading about the Chinese history before, now I understand those pioneers were trying to do something great. I didn't believe I had the power before, but now I tell people, in fact you do have the power and you need to believe in it. Yeah, like you said, a social responsibility. I used to believe the society tends to be more stable and peaceful when everyone's following the majority. Now I think everyone should think independently and make their voices heard when they want something different. (Transcripts and translation from 3rd interview)

5.1.3 Re-joining Chinese society

With these changes and the new qualities she had gained, Rachael graduated and left the country, feeling her achievements and experiences are not measurable by money. She was slightly concerned during the last interview about her re-contact with the mother land and whether there would be a necessity to adapt in again. A month after she went back, she contacted me again and told me about her awkward position in her current living community: as a UK master's degree holder, she was being envied and had to stay low, but also felt lonely for her conceptions of voice and power rarely resonated with her friends and family; on the other hand, during job hunting, none of her skills of essay writing, active questioning and discussing, or critical thinking were valued, although these were what she was trained for and made a lot of effort to gain during her master's study.

Rachael: Everything beautiful I had in UK will only exist in your interview recordings now.
(Transcripts and translation from a further contact, two months after the last interview.)

5.2 Jack's Story

Jack was my very first participant from the science and engineering programmes. He was one year older than many of his classmates who started the master's study immediately after their undergraduate degree, so he believed he was more mature and had broader horizons. He liked to cut corners and get straight to the point in both his life and study, which was apparent from the beginning of the first interview – he showed the least interest to the small talk I made to ease the mood and pushed to start the first interview question. When I asked him about his general impressions of his life in the UK, he asked me to specify what particularly I was interested in and was willing to give answers accordingly. Jack later explained that his straightforward way of thinking and doing resulted from years of training to be an engineer who identifies and solves problems in the most efficient way. Therefore, in Jack's eyes, his master's study was a project that he invested money and time in, and he expected the immediate payback and believed he had the capacity to achieve his project aims as long as he worked hard. Jack had three main aims during his master's study: learning cutting-edge technology, practising spoken English, and broadening his horizon by contacting teachers and students from different disciplines. However, he believed he had achieved none of them at the end of the study and was very disappointed. According to Jack, the cutting-edge technology was not provided in the courses; the overwhelmingly heavy study load and the severe competition among peers in the programme deprived his energy and time to contact people and practise English.

From Jack's case study, we will see the obvious contrast showed in the interviews at the beginning of his study and the second half. Jack's learner identities and motivation had shifted significantly in response to the new learning environment and the heavy study load. Not only had his learner identities varied due to the tremendously lowered

position among his peers, he had also realised a change in his values and thereby his motivation in study. He altered from a student with broad interests to one who struggled in his study, living in the fear of failure and concerned about job-hunting in the future.

5.2.1 Active adaptation

At the beginning of his study, Jack showed active agency, and would create opportunities to achieve his aims. Jack told me in the first interview that he agreed to participate in my research because he was interested in the discourses of different disciplines. He had made friends from different schools: Art, Law and Business etc. He liked to contact people with different approaches to thinking and expressing themselves, which he found intriguing and inspiring. Jack also responded actively to the more open and encouraging learning environment at school. Taken the advice from his tutor in the EAP (English for Academic Purposes) course, he strived to engage in the classroom activities and was not afraid of making mistakes.

> Jack: I think in China, students are generally not encouraged to be too active. Standing out is not a good thing in our education environment. Do you agree? Those who actively interact with teachers are excluded by others, rather it's better to stay a low profile. But here I feel I should grasp some opportunities to make mistakes. I can't do this now (in the master's study) because I'm under too much pressure in my study recently. I don't have enough knowledge in my area yet, far from making my own argument to the lecturer. However, in the EAP course, I tried my best to take the chances, speaking as much as possible in the classroom and initiating communications with my tutor. In the first session, the tutor told us to try to make more mistakes. In the last session, I asked her/him: "Have I done it well?" I meant if I have done a

good job making mistakes. S/he understood and said:" Yes, you did make a lot of mistakes."
(Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

He asked his EAP course tutor, at the beginning of the course, to correct him whenever his pronunciation was wrong, and to tell him whenever he was not expressing himself very well, either using an unsuitable word or phrase, or making a grammar mistake. He wanted to be the kind of person who is not embarrassed to make mistakes and he valued every opportunity to practise.

Jack: Yes, I made another mistake, but when they were laughing at me, they lost their chance (to practise), while I grasped the chance and had another mistake spotted.
(Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

At the first interview, Jack showed the image of a confident and active learner, willing to conquer the challenges posed by the new learning environment. He realised the study load had become heavier and the course content was increasingly difficult, but he still tried to stay positive and was willing to seek solutions in order to meet the challenge in his study. However, the story did not unfold according to his plans. Now when I am revisiting his first interview recording, which took place in the second month of the first semester, I realised he had no idea about what was going to happen and whether he was able to take the challenges. His confidence shown in the first interview was based entirely on his previous successful learning experience, but unfortunately, in the new learning environment, where the university is higher ranked, and his peers are top students from all over the world with strong academic background, he was soon overwhelmed by the competition.

5.2.2 The compression of the study load

In the second interview, which was at the beginning of the third semester, Jack had finished all the courses and assessments required by the programme and had just started his dissertation project. During the interviews and also when I was listening to the interview recording later, I could feel an obvious change in Jack's attitude and ambition. He sounded and looked very tired and disappointed.

Jack complaint that he severely lacked sleep. He felt old and had to accept the fact that he was no longer the young boy at his undergraduate study, being able to study day and night. Therefore, he felt it was necessary to make some adjustments.

> Jack: I used to get up very early in the morning but it's very difficult now because I'm constantly very tired. We all have limited energy. I could get up as early as 6 or 7am before, but it became impossible during the exam preparation time. Overuse of my brain during the day resulted in longer sleep time to rest, extending from 6 hours to 7-8 hours. When I forced myself to get up early, my brain was half sleeping the whole day and had significantly lower efficiency. The whole day would be ruined.
> ……
> I made some adjustment: I tried to make the best use of the day time and spared myself for the night to relax. I also left open at least one day at weekend to allow myself to fully rest. During my undergraduate study, I could handle it. I never had problems studying all day long. However, when the study load became huge, I realised my energy was limited. Maybe because I have become older.
> (Transcript and translation from 2nd interview.)

Acknowledging his limitations, Jack made some adjustment, however, it did not improve his situation by and large. He started to doubt his decision of coming to the UK

to study and regretted the investment he made on this master's degree.

Jack:	I kind of regret this decision of studying abroad. Firstly, there are way too many Chinese students in my programme, so I didn't get to improve my English much, maybe only on English terminologies, but with a lack of practice in speaking generally. The money is really not well spent. I did learn new knowledge but choosing to study abroad is to force myself in the language environment and to practise, however I didn't get many chances to practise.
Researcher:	Was it one of your main aims to come here? To practise English?
Jack:	Yeah. I also hoped to contact people from different disciplines, but my study load was too heavy, I didn't get much time. Learning knowledge related to my major is important indeed, but I don't really have to come here to learn the knowledge. I was hoping to learn more about the English culture and the cutting-edge technology in my area, but what we learnt is not really so advanced. We have the same knowledge provided in China.
Researcher:	Master's study is normally 2-3 years in China. You also saved some time by doing this degree in UK.
Jack:	Saving 1-2 years doesn't really make so much difference to me. I just feel what I have gained is not worth the money I paid.
	(Transcript and translation from 2nd interview.)

Jack was disappointed in the UK learning experience he invested in as well as his performance, however he was helpless because he had tried to make adjustments but had little improvement of his situation. Furthermore, the heavy study load occupied the majority of his life so that he felt unable to develop his other interests and skills. What made the situation even worse was the change of his learner identity, from a previous top student to the one who constantly needed help from his peers, through which both his pride and confidence were compromised.

5.2.3 Position swap

Jack used to be the top of his class during his undergraduate study in China. He went to a very good high school but did not have an ideal performance in the national university entry exam and thus "fell" into a low-ranked university. Therefore, he felt disappointed and believed he did not belong there because he had a much better foundational knowledge and learning capacity, and he was more ambitious. In his undergraduate degree, the students who studied (hard) were categorised as either nerds or freaks. In Chinese universities, this group is usually not bullied or discriminated against, instead, they are envied but generally isolated, so those students need to be highly self-driven to defeat the peer pressure and the lazy atmosphere. Therefore, throughout his undergraduate study, Jack had been alone and holding a dream – entering a world-class university to prove himself. When he was enrolled in his master's programme at this top university in the UK, he was thrilled.

However, whilst he was cheering, some of his classmates had the opposite feeling entering this university. For the students who used to study at the top universities in China such as Tsinghua and Fudan university, this programme at this dreamy university in Jack's eyes was not their first choice, not even the second. In fact, they felt disappointed and even frustrated "falling" into this situation. The pride Jack had for entering this world-class university was soon put out as he recognised the similar kind of disappointment.

> Jack: While I was thrilled for my success in finally stepping into this famous university, entering the new and more advanced learning environment, some of my classmates were moaning: "How did I end up here?" Actually, not only them, we also wondered that. It's just like what happened to me when I

entered my undergraduate. I didn't do well in my university entry exam, so I fell into my previous university and was stuck there for four years. I was complaining a lot. I felt the university was not good enough for me. My classmates were not good enough for me. Now I know they must have felt the same way.
(Transcript and translation from 3rd interview.)

What was more terrifying for Jack was that the competence of those students seemed effortless. Jack had to admit they were so much more advanced in the subject area than him. At the same time, Jack started to feel the heavy study load became increasingly unbearable. Therefore, soon after the first semester started, not only had Jack lost his previous sense of superiority, he sensed a significant shift of his position among his peers – from the top to nearly the bottom, from the one who offered help to the one who seeks help.

Jack: When I was doing undergraduate study, I was the one helping others. Generally speaking, the level of the students at my school were not so high. I did study hard though. Basically, they always came to me for help when they got stuck.
……
We need to humble ourselves sometimes. To be honest, for the past month (from the beginning of the semester), if we talk about change, I think I have become modest. Before, I was humble only to teachers (at my previous university), but now I need to humble myself to my classmates. For example, when I was stuck, their one simple hint may be the shortcut to solve the problem. That can save me hours, really boost the efficiency.

Researcher: What do you feel about your new position among the students?

Jack: Well, it is indeed a drop. Before, I used to spend more time to figure out problems myself. But now, I think it's good, coming here, studying with more intelligent people. The environment helps me improve myself. It's important to be able to work

> with others in the future workplace as well. We all need to compromise and cooperate.
> (Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

Fortunately, he was studying in a supportive environment for his master's study, where, according to him, his peers were generally willing to share information and to help one another, moreover his teachers were helpful and responsive. Jack was also holding a positive attitude upon arrival and in the first few months of his study, when he could still manage. He was actively taking opportunities to improve and accept the shifted position. Although I wish I could tell you he won his wrestling match with his study eventually, the fact was, over time the long-term struggle and pressure changed his learner identities, as they made him continually question himself, his ability and his decision to enrol in this master's programme. In order to cope with the fact that he still needed to finish his study and get the degree, another identity had taken over. From the second and last interview, we can see a learner that could no longer take control of his life and study, no longer developing himself according to his interests, instead he was pushed down to the ground and dragged down by numerous assignments to the finishing line, the graduation.

5.2.4 Change of motivation

The high pressure and the loss of his superior feeling among his peers transformed Jack's motivation tremendously. At the beginning, he wanted to have a chance to communicate with students from different disciplines, which was the main reason he chose this university to study over the other one with higher ranking in the same subject. In the last interview conducted after his dissertation submission, he said he was being naïve making this decision and explained there were two reasons. One is that knowing people in different programmes gave Jack the access to their study load and

life, which posed a disparity that those friends had such a colourful life besides study, so he stopped himself from using social media to peep into their lives to avoid distraction and frustration. The other reason is he acknowledged what he used to value had changed. Now he would rather spend more time on study than making friends and developing his interests in different areas, which he believed was a necessary choice he made in order to allocate his limited time and energy.

Researcher:	How did it happen?
Jack:	My understanding is… hmm, I should focus more on something practical. I do have interest in different areas, and enjoy talking to friends at different schools, but interests don't necessarily lead to a rice bowl (a common Chinese metaphor for a job). Only a handful of people can turn their interests into a rice bowl. They are very lucky. But for those who are less lucky, they need to decide between interests and getting skills for a living. It would be nice to cultivate an interest in what they do, but it's not always easy. Sometimes I felt I had to force myself to learn a skill for a living. For examples, some engineers are good at certain programming language, and some are good at software or hardware. It would turn boring if you have to do it over and over again, nothing else, but the skill is practical (as in a job). Interests can't afford a life.
Researcher:	Are you not interested in what you are studying?
Jack:	I have interests to some extent, but not enough to keep me going.
Researcher:	Do you have any interest in anything? Arts? Sociology?
Jack:	This is the most terrible change happened this year. I don't feel interested in anything now. Or rather, I don't want to choose to work on anything out of interests. This is a problem. On one hand, interests don't last long and on the other, once you start working on it, once it has become a task, the interest is gone.
Researcher:	Were you interested in anything before?
Jack:	I had interest in my major, but it became a torture over time under too much pressure and the interest was worn out. It

consumed my passion slowly, by working on it every day and staying in the lab all the time. I think scientists must have a very strong volition, some may be really passionate in their areas, but most of them, I think, have to be strong enough to hold on there, devoting in research for decades.
(Transcript and translation from 3rd interview.)

Jack was basically crushed by the study load, despite trying to respond actively to the new learning environment, and despite the constant support from his peers and teachers. His values and motivation had shifted, and he was no longer enjoying his study, rather he was driven to keep up by the pressure.

Jack: Before, my motivation was mainly from myself, my interest and my confidence of being able to do a good job, now the situation is different. Most of the time I feel I have to do it well because it's my only way out. Here, everyone is so competent, so if I don't keep up, I will be eliminated.
……
What's driving me is fear.
(Transcript and translation from 3rd interview.)

Jack was constantly worried that he might not have learnt enough skills and knowledge to find a job after he graduated, after losing so many battles competing with his peers who were younger and had better performance in their study than him. When he entered the last semester, the dissertation project, he was assigned a helpful supervisor with whom he had a good relationship and effective communication. He was pleased working with his supervisor and felt supported and respected; however, he was still insecure. From his understanding, the dissertation stage was for the students to apply their knowledge in practice and to exercise their problem-solving ability as an engineer. He expected himself to work independently but often found himself in a dilemma.

Jack: I tried my best not to ask my supervisor many questions because it's important for me to experience the process of finding solutions, as a future engineer. I sometimes felt s/he lowered down the standards, so my tasks were easier. It stressed me out because it meant I might have lost some chances to learn. I found myself sometimes struggling between my indolence and worrying about what I have missed.
(Transcript and translation from 2nd interview.)

In comparison with his peers, Jack believed he was lucky to be assigned maybe the "best" supervisor at school, who was highly responsive and helpful. However, his anxiety was throughout the whole dissertation time. During the last interview, Jack mentioned his disappointment in his learning experience in the master's programme was improved slightly after his supervisor signed him up with a training course and he had the privilege to learn a new programming language. He appreciated the opportunity and felt it had brought him stronger motivation to hold on to the end of the project. When being asked to conclude his one-year experience living and studying in UK, he said he had many regrets. He wished he could have studied harder.

5.2.5 Conclusion

Jack was only one year older than the majority of his classmates and was definitely not the oldest one in his programme, but he felt old and tired during the master's study and he doubted whether he was taking on too much for his age. In his opinion, the study he made a massive payment for did not bring him distinctively advanced technology but deprived him of the time and interest to contact people from different cultures and disciplines or to develop in the area of his interest. The experience took away his ambition and courage to make exploration. It instead, constantly reminded him of his incompetence via comparisons with his peers. It may take years for Jack to regain his

confidence, or maybe the experience has forever changed him. At the end of the study, Jack still felt he was not making enough effort in his study, from which we could see how helpless he was throughout his study facing the severe competition and heavy study load. I believe there are more solutions apart from working extra hard. I will take this question to the discussion chapter.

5.3 Flora’s story

Flora was a master's student in the School of Education. She experienced an extraordinary transformation during her 1.5 years stay in the UK, in terms of her learner identities and her personality. From the beginning, she was fundamentally an active learner who was willing to be open to challenges, making bold attempts and had eventually managed to fit in the new learning environment, taking charge of her learning to a great extent. What was more interesting in her story was that her perception about her personality had changed significantly during her academic transition. The change was not in a single direction, instead, it may help us understand the process more if we imagine a ball bouncing back and forth between two parallel walls – her change resembles the movement of the ball. During such a short time, she went to one extreme then bounced back and charged towards the other extreme. At the end of her journey, the last interview, she reported that her position was in the middle and she demonstrated a more relaxed and uncontrolled way of being. She enjoyed the status very much and wished that she could have longer time to stay in this zone to stabilise it. Unfortunately, she had to go back to China soon after, which meant her living environment was going to change again. She believed the UK environment had facilitated her development and transformation for it was safe, relaxing with a lot of time and space for her to finish self-negotiation and probe her boundaries.

Flora was one of the closest to me among all the participants and we had four interviews throughout the year, one more than planned, because between the first interview (September 2016) and the second (June 2017), she contacted me in December 2016 and said she wanted to tell me some huge changes in herself and her attitude towards life. Therefore, I managed to capture her coping and adjustment in more stages, which made the data even richer. I have quoted long paragraphs of her

interview transcripts, for I believe the thick description she provided was so vivid it could convey better how she made sense of her own transition.

If I am to interpret the reasons for Flora's significant difference from the changing factors in her new living environment, I would draw attention to two stances: the slower pace and the diversity in both her living and studying environment and, the kind and respectful way she was treated, by her teachers, peers and those people she made contact with. I will develop this discussion further later in this section.

5.3.1 Change of environment

5.3.1.1 Changed relationship in the learning environment

Flora reported an essential difference between her previous learning experience in China, mainly during her undergraduate study, and the new learning environment was that the students did not need to "earn" the teachers' attention by serving the teachers or standing out among the classmates. She told me about her busy study and "work" life during her undergraduate study, when she had to take care of her programme tutor's administrative work as well as her 60 classmates.

Flora:	I was the head student of the class, so I had very frequent contact with all the teachers, our course teacher and the programme tutor. I felt in China, it was all about reciprocity, not simply the relationship between teachers and students. The teachers only give you attention when they need you.
Researcher:	Need you like what?
Flora:	A lot of chores. Like our programme tutor asked me to do a lot of administrative work for her/him. I needed to assess the candidates for the school scholarship and financial-aid (both granted on a yearly basis) because I was more familiar with

	my classmates' situations. I needed to write a report and fill all the forms once the decision was made. I also needed to make a record when a student requested leave of absence.
Researcher:	Did you have to take the responsibility for all of those?
Flora:	Yeah, me alone.
Researcher:	Were you like a personal tutor for your classmates?
Flora:	In terms of administration, yes. The programme tutor didn't take care of these chores, so I had to do the job for her/him. It was like an exchange.
Researcher:	You did her/his job, so s/he treated you well.
Flora:	Yeah. But it's very different here (in the UK).
	(Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

A programme tutor is very common at Chinese universities, assigned to manage the administrative work of a programme and to support the students, thus equivalent to both a personal tutor and a programme secretary at the universities in the UK, but not programme director, because they do not make decisions in terms of the teaching and learning in the programme.

A head student of the class at Chinese universities is normally chosen by the programme tutor or voted in by the students to serve administrative purposes. Unlike the student representative in the UK, a head student does not represent the students, rather they help the programme tutor with the admin work. This kind of position is common at universities in China, but the situation varies. In her case, the programme tutor was supporting about 60 students in the programme, which means the workload was high. Head students do not get paid, but they get more attention from the tutors and more opportunities such as funding or conferences. Therefore, Flora felt it was a reciprocal relationship. Flora's programme tutor was also teaching an essential course of this programme, which made it important for Flora to conduct her support work even more carefully, for her performance could bring the tutor's extra help with her studies.

From Flora's description of her undergraduate study, she portrayed an image of a busy girl who was always fighting alone and taking a lot of responsibilities. In her mind, her tutor was treating her well because she was useful, while her peers were generally not up to her standard, therefore she chose to carry out both her study and her work on her own.

> Flora: Before (during the undergraduate study), I had a very high standard and didn't think my classmates were doing the work well enough, so in order to save time, I just did everything by myself.
> (Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

Flora had a stressful undergraduate life, when she positioned herself as superior to her peers, hence, she was trying to carry everything on her own shoulders. Flora also developed the habit that she both pursued efficiency and pushed herself to the extreme in order to get the most of her time, especially when the workload was beyond her capacity. Therefore, activities that did not bring obvious benefit to her self-development such as watching TV for a whole afternoon had been categorised as meaningless activities and a waste of her time. She still kept this habit in the first few months staying in the UK, however, she admitted that the utilitarian habit was not healthy and over-occupying herself had led to many problems.

> Flora: I don't like myself in this kind of status, constantly worrying and stressed. Worries lead to mistakes. But sometimes I couldn't help worrying, when there were so many things for me to do and I had to do all these things by myself, that kind of stressful status… When I had problems in my study before, I had to fight for it, try to conquer it. When I was preparing for IELTS, I also had to deal with all the damn chores for my classmates, I had to fill many forms, to make decisions and

plans, and so on. It was me alone dealing with all these. I had to keep myself always efficient, so I could finish them by the deadlines.
(Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

However, in the new learning environment, Flora could relax and be just a student.

Flora: … the interaction brought me more of a feeling of warmth. I could feel the teacher simply wanted to help me, to solve my problems.
…
I felt that the teacher-student relationship was a lot more complicated in China.
…
The teachers in China. I just felt I had to make a lot of efforts. I didn't like the environment.
(Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

Flora mentioned particularly in the EAP courses, the tutors were very carefully allocating equal attention to each student.

Researcher: What do you feel different here in terms of your study?
Flora: I feel we can get more attention here and more interactions in the group work. Teachers can allocate their attention equally to each student. In China, it's always a few students getting all the attentions from the teachers.
(Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

During both the EAP course and after the semester started, Flora also enjoyed being engaged in the classroom discussion and talking freely about her thoughts and ideas.

Flora: I don't think the teachers were teaching much. Most of the time, the students were discussing and speaking.
Researcher: How do you think about this method?

Flora: I think it's better.
Researcher: Why?
Flora: In China, I felt sometimes the teacher was trying to pour all the teaching content into the students. It was ok if it was something I was interested in. But if I was not, I wasn't willing to accept the information, so the time was wasted. Here, maybe I was not interested either, but when I was engaged in the discussion, I became intrigued, and I felt I was actively accepting the information rather than just receiving. I also could hear different voices (opinions from other students). As I mentioned, I've been trying to find many, unlimited possibilities, I need to hear different voices from my peers. (Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

Through the discussions and team work, Flora also found value in her peers, both in their opinions and their support. She was inspired by their thoughts from a variety of perspectives through the discussions and interactions, furthermore, she appreciated their encouragement and feedback, which helped her gradually build confidence.

The change of the learning environment especially the relationship with her tutors and peers reshaped Flora's world. Her insight of her life and herself developed with Flora opening up and sharing with peers and friends, as people from different worlds walked into her life and showed her the varieties and dimensions. Flora's horizon expanded in order to contain the differences and she learnt to respect and accept the world and herself via continual negotiation and interaction. I will present more examples in the following section.

5.3.1.2 The relatively free and unrestrained atmosphere.

Right after Flora started her new life in the UK, she pushed herself to explore the new environment. Her courage, on one hand, stemmed from herself being a total stranger in

this city with less fear of “making a fool of herself” by making mistakes because nobody knew her. On the other hand, the city and the university kindly provided a friendly and supporting atmosphere, meanwhile the life pace was significantly slower, so she felt safe and relaxed.

Researcher: People here are very nice.
Flora: Yeah, they are so nice. They are always very patient, answering all my questions. I went to the school Gym a lot recently. I experimented with many different types of exercise equipment.
Researcher: To try them out.
Flora: Yeah, if I embarrass myself, well, nobody knows me, hahaha. I don’t care.
(Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

Furthermore, Flora also felt exempt temporarily from the standardised social expectations in China.

Flora: In China, there’s a fixed expectation for everyone in each age stage. You need to do certain things according to your age. You can’t do these things too early, they say you are premature; you also can’t do them too late, that’s too slow. For example, we normally graduate from university when we are 22. Then from 22 to 23, we’d better find a job, then get married at 24 or 25 then have a baby, so basically by 28 or 29, we need to settle down, have a family and have a stable life pattern. It is so widely accepted as a normal life style. I think this kind of life style is terrible for people who don’t have a clear purpose so just follow the majority. They may waste their entire lives just like this, without having a thorough consideration about the choice they made. They chose a way that’s accepted by the majority to ensure their sense of security. They probably don’t know what they really want, just because this is the pattern everyone is following, it must make sense. This is how they consume their lives. For

this group of people, I feel… they are too… this is not the life I want.

Researcher: What kind of life do you want?

Flora: I don't know yet. I'm still exploring.

(Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

Flora did not want to live a life according to the social norms, following the majority. She wanted to be different and was making every effort to obtain the first clue leading to a life she wanted. After she came to the UK, Flora no longer needed to carry out extra administrative tasks along with her study, meanwhile she was unconstrained by the social rules and pressure she had to undertake in China. Therefore, she made attempts to release herself from her own discipline and stress, especially after developing trust with her tutors and peers. She later commented that the slower life pace and the supporting environment allowed her space and time to consider and experience various possibilities to develop a life style that is to her interest and comfort. She did not know what it looked like, but she knew how it felt like.

Flora: I think it's just the schedule was too tight before, they didn't give me time to think. Now, I could feel it, experience it with my body, slowly, so I could learn what I'm capable of. I could have a try or just leave it. My whole status is pretty good, although there was bad time and good time, but I've found out something new compared with the time I just arrived here.

(Transcript and translation from 2nd interview.)

5.3.2 Change of self

In responding to the changed environment and relationships, Flora was flexible and responsive enough to make adjustments and as a result, in her account, her personality has changed. She continued to make new friends, explored and adapted to the new

world with them, and built up travelling groups and study groups. Through the constant comparisons and interactions with her friends, she learnt about herself -- her limits and her capability, so that she started to accept herself as who she was and cultivated a lower pressure attitude to herself, her study, life, and others. Instead of pushing herself to the limit, she stepped back and tried to enjoy her life.

5.3.2.1 Peer support and group work

Flora acknowledged that she could not and should not carry everything on her shoulders and started to share her burdens with her friends and classmates.

> Flora: …after I came here I realised: why did I have to carry out all these by myself? I could have asked other people to help, or found other solutions, or just given myself more time. My status is changing.
> (Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

After three months of study in the UK, Flora started to like team work and to enjoy the mutual trust and support with her peers. She realised she was in transition and she valued her relationship and companionship with others.

> Flora: Before, I thought my time was so precious, but now as the pace of my life slows down, I felt… before, my time was spent on things that could bring me the most benefit, for example, more time to study could get me a higher GPA, leading to a higher chance to get the national scholarship, so study was my priority. But it's different now. I hope my time… as the pace of my life slows down, I have a lot of time now, I want to build relationships and companionships with others, I've changed my mind, this is what I value now, so I'd rather spend time on this. I'm in the transition. I have different things to pursue in different stages. I'm learning to ask for

help and trying to build up and deal with the relationships with people, these are what I'm learning now. I like this status, including the time when I was working with my peers in the study. It felt good. It was a nice beginning. As it develops, there will probably be problems and conflicts, but I may adjust and learn something from the process. (Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

Flora explained that she learned about the importance of cooperation and companionship from Naruto (a Japanese animated TV series) before she came to the UK. She perceived that the social environment in the UK was more unconstrained, and appreciated the space and time it offered, so that she started to think about who she wanted to be and what lifestyle she would like to have. The spirit of companionship in Naruto was exercised and developed in the UK living environment.

As the practice of co-operation and collaboration continued, Flora built trust with her peers and made huge improvements in team work. One of the examples that is worth mentioning is that her peers and she organised a study group in order to revise for a difficult assessment at the end of the first semester.

Flora: There was a course that we couldn't understand anything the lecturer taught. We tried Wikipedia but still couldn't understand the basic concepts. For most of the reading materials, I wouldn't understand even if they were written in Mandarin, so we organised a study group. Each one of us had one session of the course content to prepare each day, then we taught each other on the next day in the group study. We went to the group study every morning to teach each other and discuss from 9 to 12, then we all went to my place to cook. In the afternoon, we went back to the library separately to prepare for the allocated sessions for the next day. Within 3 days, we went through the whole course content.

(Transcript and translation from 2nd interview.)

5.3.2.2 Self-negotiation

Flora mentioned in the first interview that she tended to compare other people's strengths with her weaknesses, which was a source of her motivation to make improvement and also the reason she was able to be sensitive to her living environment and to make constant adjustments accordingly. However, at the beginning of my contact with her, I pointed out, and she agreed, that she tended to focus on the negative side in herself rather than the positive.

> Flora: I'm very good at finding my weaknesses and can be very harsh to myself. For example, my English speaking is not so good, so I pushed myself to speak more, but when I made mistakes, I felt really bad and frustrated. So when I received any kind of encouragement or compliment, I felt a lot better and was willing to try more and do better to be worthy the compliment. Basically I always try to find my shortcomings. (Transcript and translation from 1st interview.)

Flora had a female flatmate who was at the time a PhD student at the same university, but at a different school. Therefore, soon she got to know her friends, who, according to Flora, were extremely intelligent, competent but easy-going and humble. With Flora's tendency to make comparisons with other people's strengths, she realised the huge gap between the elite group and herself through the daily contact and collapsed overnight that she burst into tears. The acute frustration pushed her to the end of envy and self-blame, and resulted in a bounce back, towards the acceptance of the reality and self.

> Flora: When I looked back, I felt when I was comparing my weaknesses with others' strengths, the inferiority feeling was

like a blasting fuse. It exposed all the buried memories, all the emotion and problems I had been trying to avoid, and those I couldn't deal with. It made me acutely aware that I was not capable of solving those problems or digesting the negative emotions, I could only accept them. They were like a big mountain that was crushing me day by day, until I exploded.
…
I had to learn to accept myself, when I knew that no matter how hard I tried, I could never reach that level. I lost, at the beginning of the game. There's no way I could ever be as good as them.
(Transcript and translation from 2nd interview.)

The crying night was a turning point in her life because from then on, she stopped "whipping" herself into unnecessary pains and tried to use a more gentle and soft way to conduct self-negotiation. In another word, she started to treat herself and others like how she was treated in this new environment.

Flora: Now when I see my weaknesses, I could open my heart and accept it. I stopped forcing myself to conquer it. I changed to a soft way, to gently push myself, slowly. For example, when I was running (on a treadmill), if I couldn't finish a 40 minutes target, I used to blame myself very harshly: "Why can't you finish it? Why can't you hold on a little longer? It's not like you are dying!" Now, when I felt too exhausted to finish, I told myself that: "Do you feel tired? You can have a 5-minute break, then continue when you feel better." So I can finish the 40 minutes target, by gently and positively negotiating with myself.
(Transcript and translation from 2nd interview.)

She gradually learnt and accepted her limitations and made use of what was available in her surroundings. The slower life pace also gave her plenty of time for self-reflection and self-negotiation. She started to slow down and enjoy her life, although, 6 months

later, in the third interview, she concluded this stage as going towards the end in the opposite direction – giving up and letting go. She explained that she had to accept herself and the environment because she did not have a choice, following which she had a period of time enjoying the wild joy of freedom from her previous severe self-discipline and soon lost control of her life and study, and completely gave up fighting. The next bouncing back happened during her dissertation time, which in the last interview, she referred as the peaceful stage, where she had finally found a balance.

Flora:	I experienced extreme self-abased and full-blown optimistic stages. Now I've finally bounced back to the middle. I could finally find a balance. I am who I am now, a different individual hahaha.
Researcher:	What about the stage in winter when you had a great self-acceptance? You seemed to be very happy and content about your situation back then.
Flora:	That was a fake one. I was on the way to the optimistic end. There was a time I lost control and gave up on myself.
Researcher:	What about now?
Flora:	I'm ok now. I like my life style, stable with a peaceful mind. I just wish I could have stayed in this status a little bit longer, so I could imprint the feeling in my mind, so I could find it again when I go back to China. … This is what I like, either in a fluster, or being slack. I have developed a certain rhythm for my life, my part-time job, my working-out.
Researcher:	I remember in the first interview, you said you wanted to find what you wanted to do for your life, what you liked to do. But you haven't found what you like to do.
Flora:	Yeah, but I have found what kind of life style I like, I'm most comfortable with. (Transcript and translation from 4th interview.)

5.3.2.3 Change of learner identities

As mentioned in the methods chapter, as part of the research design, I made forty cards with key words or phrases. The participants were asked to pick 6-8 cards at the end of each interview and to rank them in order to answer the question -- what do you value the most in learning? The purpose of the design is to compare the priority of the participants in their learning over time. In the last interview, they were asked to compare the three rankings and to interpret, if they could, why there were certain tendency showing in the comparison.

In Flora's case (figure 9-11), according to the card ranking in the first, third and fourth interviews, the cards that referred to teachers' roles, i.e. clear instruction, communication and feedback, were ranked higher at the beginning of her study, but were gradually moved towards the bottom which represent less importance, while the cards that implied her role and responsibility as a student became prominent. Flora interpreted the change, in the last interview, as the teachers playing a less and less important role in her study. Especially during her dissertation time, she believed her supervisor was supporting rather than leading her study. Meanwhile, the card self-control and stick to plans, according to Flora, both refer to her ability of self-discipline, which developed at the expense of her reliance on the teachers, as her learner autonomy progressed.

Flora:	Communication and clear guidance are the teachers' roles.
Researcher:	It seems the teachers' position in your mind has been moving backwards.
Flora:	Yeah, they mainly acted as a source of support, while my own role stood out steadily…… And self-control and stick to plans, I gradually knew what I needed to do. My effort and control in my study became more and more obvious (during the three stages of my study, divided by the three interviews), with the teachers' influence withdrew gradually. (Transcript and translation from 4th interview.)

Another noticeable change in the three card-ranking activity was that Flora prioritised her ability of being confident in the first interview, however it disappeared in the following ones. She explained that at the beginning of her study here, the language barrier was the largest obstacle and she had to emphasise her confidence to speak and practice in every occasion. As the time she spent in UK became longer, and hence she made progress in her language in both listening and speaking, she became increasingly active and confident in communications. Therefore, confidence was no longer needed or at least not a priority in her study.

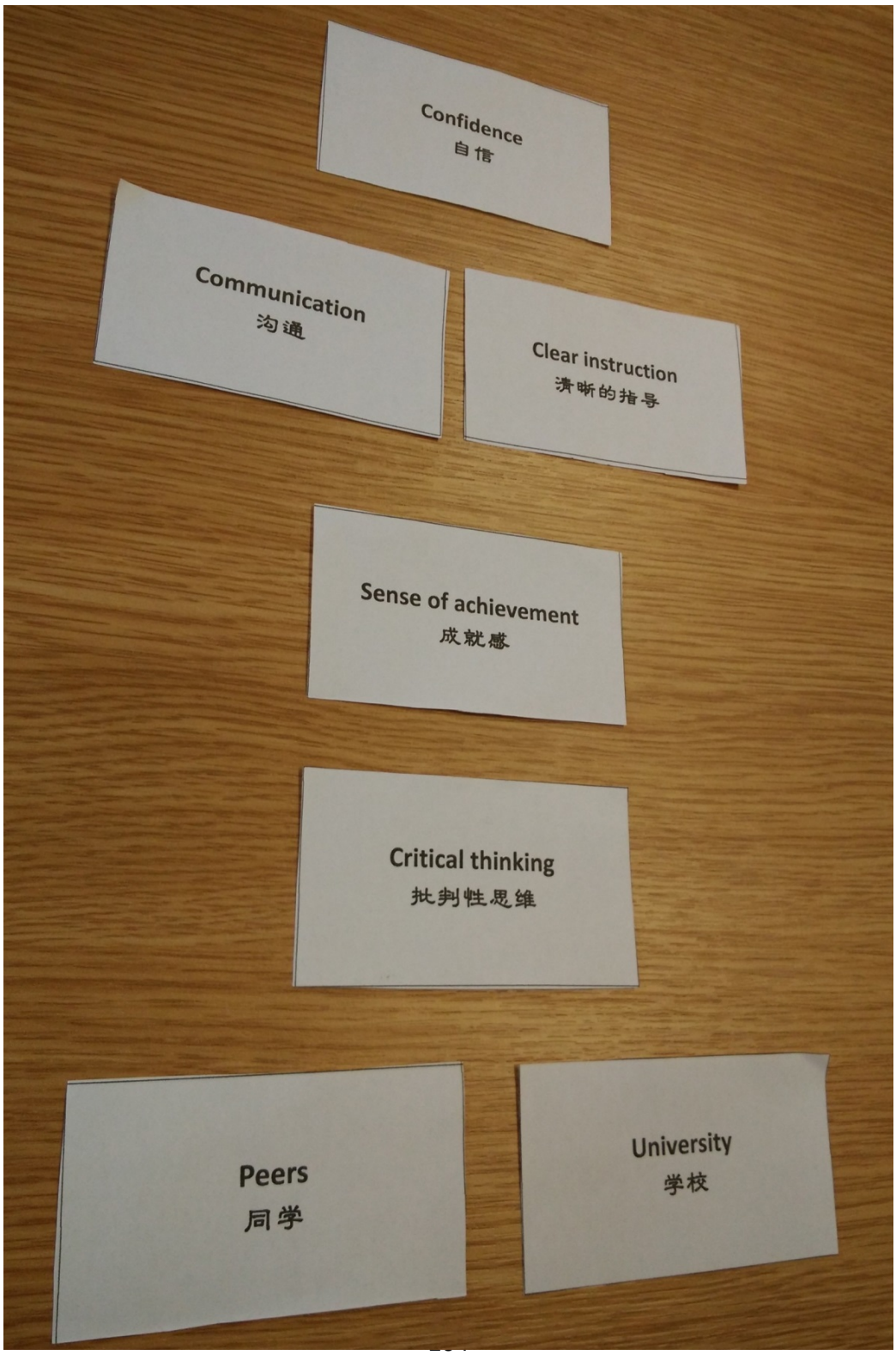
Confidence
自信
Communication
沟通
Clear instruction
清晰的指导
Sense of achievement
成就感
Critical thinking
批判性思维
Peers
同学
University
学校

Figure 9 Flora, 1st interview, 8th September 2016

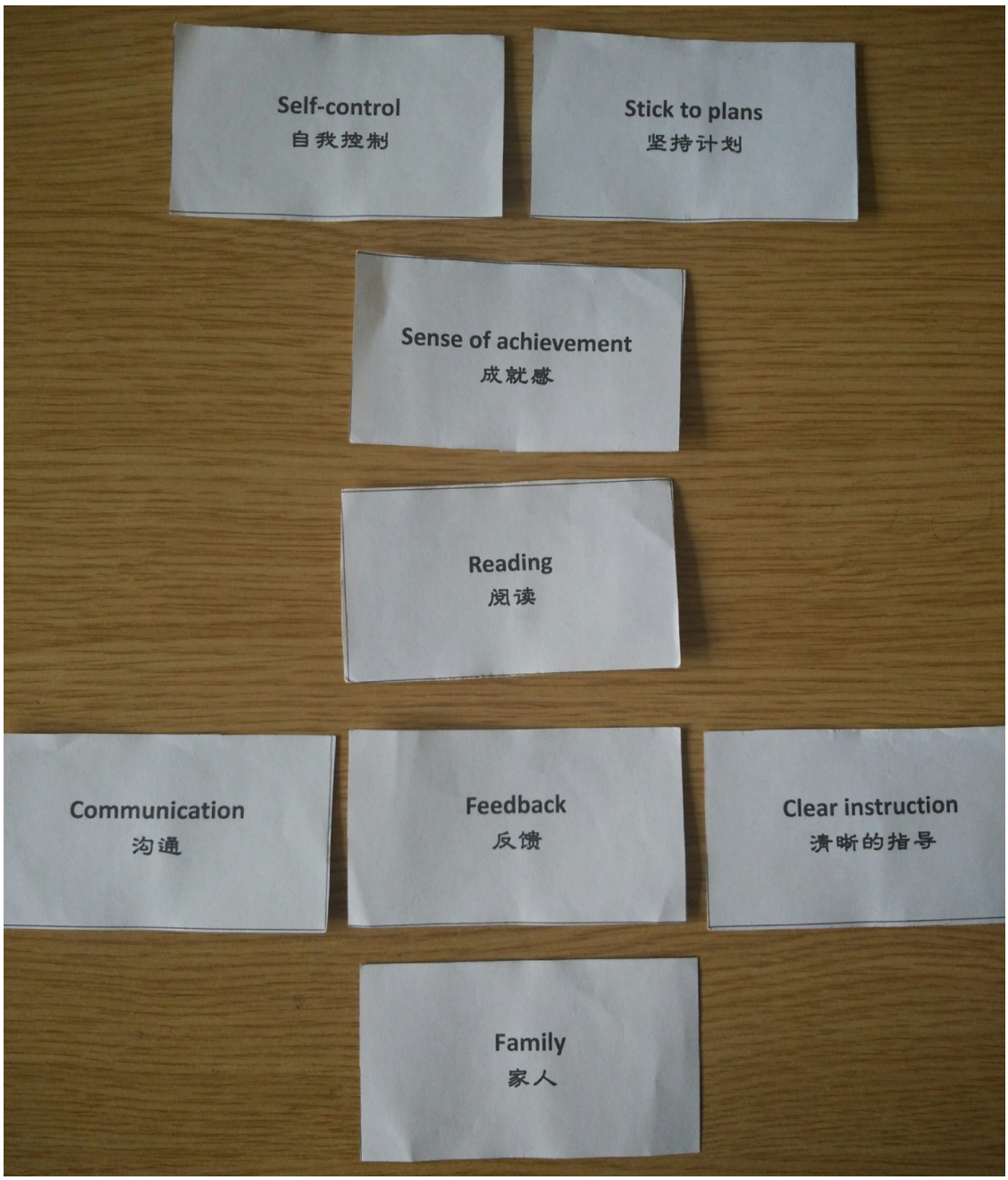

Figure 10 Flora 3rd interview, 15th June 2017

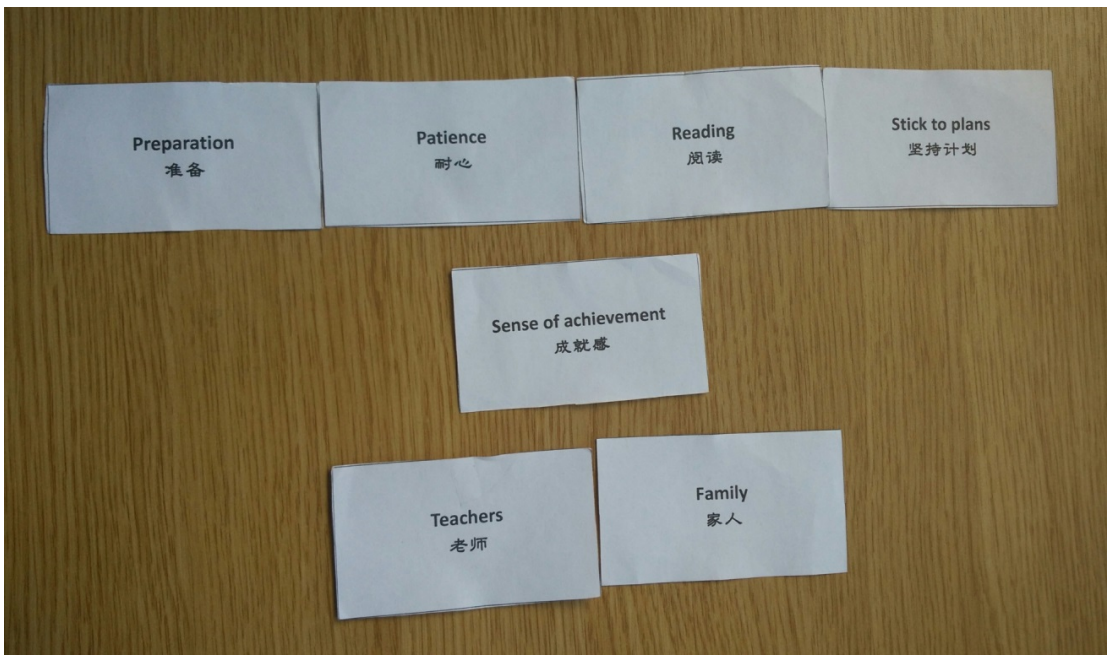

Figure 11 Flora, 4th interview, 17th August 2017

5.3.3 Conclusion

Flora is like a mirror that reflects the environment she is living in in an honest manner. She was trained during a long-term compression in her life and study in China to be a student who was carrying numerous responsibilities, recognised the reciprocal relationship as the only social protocol, and believed shaming through punishment or comparison with others were the simulation for her to make improvement. She was punished when making a mistake by her teachers, supervisors and those who had control over her choices, and therefore she did the same to herself in order to "whip" out her potential and meet the expectations. The image of a busy, stressed, hard-working student started to shift in response to the change of the environment where

punishment was replaced by encouragement, reciprocation by gentle dedication and kind and trustworthy companionship, fast pace by slow and relaxing pace with space to make mistakes and choices. From her case, we could clearly see how a student's personal development and study experiences are intertwined step by step, furthermore how the value and culture in the UK HE had profoundly influenced a person's life.

Many students come to the UK to study with vague expectations of what they could get from it (Fong, 2011). Like many of the research participants, Flora chose to come to the UK for a higher degree and to explore a different world for a potentially wider horizon and a better future. She wanted to find herself during the journey, to know herself and find out what she wanted to do in the future. Flora eventually found something, not what she wanted to do in the future but her favourite and most comfortable life style. She felt life was full of surprises and she was happy to take away what she had gained and developed to her new life in China.

Transcribing and translating Flora's interview recordings were particularly challenging. For one reason, we both shared a great deal in our lives during the interview, therefore, by the time I revisited the recordings, it felt like time travel, and especially as both our lives had shifted to a great extent. For another, I played an extremely active role in the interview (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003): we defined and negotiated a lot of meanings together, challenged each other and had a laugh. When revising the recording, I judged my interview skills and doubted if I had imposed too much of myself during the conversation. Therefore, I have sent my writing of her story for her to read and fortunately, Flora had confirmed my writing and expressed that myself and my recording of her transition were both part of her valuable experience living and studying in the UK.

Chapter 6 Discussion Chapter

6.1 Introduction

In the beginning of the thesis, I explained that the research aimed to investigate the following overarching questions by conducting qualitative research:

1. In what ways do Chinese students feel able to be autonomous in their master's studies? Does this change over time?

2. How do UK teaching, learning and assessment practices affect their identities as learners?

The following additional research questions were developed as the study progressed:

3. Are there examples of ways in which the differences between UK and China have reduced in terms of teaching, learning and assessment from the experience of the research participants?

4. To what extent do the research participants feel it has been necessary to adjust how they approach their learning to suit the UK context and how does this adjustment relate to their identities and autonomy as learners?

The four research questions are overarching in nature, and therefore it is difficult to answer them completely separately. I will use two sections in this chapter in order to answer the first two main research questions, throughout which we could also find answers to the rest of the questions. I will firstly summarise and discuss how the

teaching, learning and assessment practices in the UK were perceived by the participants and how they had affected their transition experience, which can mainly answer the second research question. In this section, I will also illustrate the relationship between teachers and students, as well as between peers, as both teachers and peers composed important parts in the UK teaching and learning community and they played significant roles in the facilitation and development of learner autonomy. Following the discussion of UK TLA, I will then present a transition stage model generated from the research data, which may demonstrate the process of students' transition in learner autonomy and how it changes according to the students' perceptions of the learning environment as well as the different expectations on the students in different stages of their study, which may answer the first research question. Although not every individual moved tidily through all the stages of the model, as the research data showed the individual transition experience to be highly varied, the model may help us understand the students' struggles and conflict in each stage of the transition into UK HE.

It is clear from the findings of this research that when encountering UK higher education, Chinese students would unavoidably experience a variety of surprises in both their learning and living environments which to some extent affected or even reshaped the students' identities. These surprising situations and new rules may have posed challenges to the students' transition process, but they were not necessarily obstacles that hindered their development. They can be understood as "culture bumps" (Wu, 2011) or culture shocks (Zhou et al., 2008) due to individual differences and personal previous experiences in the undergraduate study. In some of the previous research conducted in a similar context, Chinese students are found to be living in peer "bubbles" (Gu et al., 2009) or experiencing "international postgraduate student culture rather than integration in to local culture" (Wu, 2011, p. 423). However, in this research,

participants have also presented a variety of transitions. That is to say, some of the participants seem to live in the bubble where they co-create a safe place with their peers from China and some even from the same area of China, while some of the participants had lived a broader life with different ethnicities from vastly different cultures.

6.2 TLA in the UK in the participants' eyes.

I have given a lot of examples in the findings chapter of how TLA in the UK HE had a significant effect on students' learner identities and the development of their learner autonomy. In order to answer the research questions (mainly the second question), summarise the findings and connect my arguments with the wider literature, I will discuss them in different sections although they are interconnected and inseparable. TLA in the UK HE is not new to every participant and a few even expressed that they did not feel they needed to make an adjustment in terms of their learning methods. However, every participant who spoke about the interaction with teachers and peers reported the different relationship between teachers and students, and between students, which had a dramatic effect on the transition experience and therefore their learner identities.

In this section, I will first compare the different beliefs the teachers hold in the Western and Chinese education and explain how it may cause confusion when Chinese students encounter Western teachers due to different expectations and roles they used to play. Although the majority of the participants in this research did not show resistance to the new requirements, some of them even appreciated the new TLA, such a positive attitude does not guarantee a spontaneous adaptation as students need more support tailored to their ability and needs. Therefore, to the surprise of a majority of the

participants, peer collaboration was broadly adopted in order to cope with the (new) requirements in the UK HE and it was proved in the data to be extremely helpful.

Self-control and time-management were also common obstacles reported by the participants, which are key to learner autonomy. These issues were particularly problematic to those who used to cram intensively in a short time before the exams in China, therefore I will discuss the issues with the new assessment methods in the UK. In the assessment section, I will explain the memory-based assessments in the participants' previous studies in China were largely replaced by problem-solving-based assessments in the master's study in the UK. Some students had few experiences approaching this type of assessment which required significantly longer time to prepare, therefore the lack of capacity in learner autonomy may have not appeared to be an issue in the undergraduate study but later in the master's study was brought to focus.

6.2.1 Teaching and learning

6.2.1.1 Educational beliefs in the West and China

As I discussed in the literature review, Chinese learners and Western teachers may sometimes hold different beliefs about education based on different philosophical foundations. Therefore, they may have mismatching expectations of each other in terms of the roles and responsibilities they should take respectively.

Teachers in Western HE often play a role as a "gatekeeper" for a discipline in the students' teaching and learning activities, to both *enable* and *constrain* simultaneously (Anderson, 2005). The constraining function refers to the tutor's responsibility for the

novices, to “lead students towards ways of construing particular topics or problem situations in an appropriate fashion” (p.196). In the meantime, the tutors are also enabling the students to form their perspectives on topics and encourage them to engage in discussions and thereby taking part in academic life. The enabling and constraining functions may not act as contradictory as their literary meanings in the teaching and learning context, for both the functions aim to shape the students’ behaviour according to the norms in the particular academic culture, which defines what performance is appropriate and how the participants gain “agency” in this culture.

> … our own task in learning how to act personally, as an autonomous member of our culture, is in learning how *to do* all the things in our culture, like measuring, inferring, remembering, perceiving, listening, speaking, etc., we must learn how to do them as the others around us do them – we must learn how *to be* as they are. Indeed, if we do not, then they will sanction us and not accord us the right to act freely. (Shotter, 1993, p.70)

In China, on the other hand, “the focus of teaching is not on how teachers and students can create, construct, and apply knowledge in an experiential approach, but on how extant authoritative knowledge can be transmitted and internalised in a most effective and efficient way” (Hu, 2002, p.99). This may not apply to all the schools and universities in China, but we could find evidences in the participants’ comments that they tend to or were educated to believe knowledge is transmitted and application should be built on vast amount of knowledge accumulation; whereas Western teachers accept more widely that knowledge is co-constructed and should be learnt from application (Brick, 2004).

The different pedagogies in China and the UK may explain the resistance and struggle of Chinese students reported in the previous research as being less autonomous in learning, lacking active reflection and integration of new knowledge, and thereby

having relatively less engagement in their learning. This research also found students experienced different expectations in the UK master's study than their previous undergraduate study experience in China. Tracy, for instance, as previously cited in the findings chapter, said, "Before (in China), nobody cared about what I thought. The teachers only cared about what they thought, how to deliver their thoughts and how to make us remember more", whilst in the UK, she was expected to contribute to the classroom discussion and was "being pushed" to think critically in both her reading and writing. Under such circumstances, Chinese students had different responses and coping techniques, which will be illustrated below.

6.2.1.2 Students' different responses to the UK HE experiences

We need to be aware that it is inappropriate to generalise the conclusions of the earlier research to every Chinese international student, as the 19 participants involved in this research demonstrated a vast array of different reactions to UK pedagogy and had distinct transition experiences. First of all, not every participant expressed that the pedagogy adopted in the UK was new and that they felt it necessary to adjust their way of learning to suit the new learning environment. This may help answer the third and fourth research questions as students reported the reduction of the differences between the two countries in terms of pedagogy (the third research question) and not everyone needed to make adjustment to approach their learning in the UK (the fourth research question). Two of the participants, from the School of Education and School of Engineering respectively, even expressed their surprise when the teachers were not as responsive to their questions and did not provide an open and relaxed learning environment as they expected for the Western education. However, the majority of the participants did find the pedagogy and assessment methods were significantly different and even more challenging, which leaves the UK educators with important questions to

reflect on about how they work with Chinese learners.

Secondly, many participants noticed the new “guiding” method in the UK pedagogy rather than “teaching” because they felt they were more involved in the teaching and learning activities where students’ opinions are encouraged and valued. The majority of participants who reported this difference expressed that they preferred this new experience, for a better focus and understanding or they simply enjoyed expressing their ideas and having a voice. I also explained in the findings chapter that many of the Chinese students felt comfortable and confident and proved to be competent in expressing their opinions in the classroom discussion. These findings contradict the previous research that pointed out the incompetent performance of Chinese students in terms of their involvement in the teaching and learning activities, particularly in their independent and critical thinking, and their active participating in the classroom activities. (Chalmers and Volet, 1997; Gieve and Clark, 2005; Liu and Jackson, 2011; Sit, 2013)

Furthermore, the research data also illustrated how the students who reported differences generally experienced distinct pedagogies according to their disciplines. Participants from School of Education immediately realised they were expected to actively engage in classroom discussions, through which they could develop and frame their own perspectives, as the subject involves various “unsettled territory” that can be occupied by numerous experts on the same topic with different and even competing opinions (Anderson, 2005). Therefore, participants from the School of Education needed to approach each theory and concept with a critical lens and some initially or continuously struggled when the teachers did not tell them which opinion to take. On the other hand, participants from sciences programmes, where the content is more “settled” and required less debate, were required to develop the ability to apply what

they learn in practice, or even to learn from practice, finding out the reasons of an error or posing different solutions. In their words, they are trained to be a scientist / an engineer.

The guiding pedagogy and the expectation on the students to take the role as an independent learner, thinking critically and making a voice, are rooted in the Western culture and education values, and therefore along with the Western teachers, created a different learning community, for those who could perceive it. Immersing and interacting in such a community for the students may require a series of different techniques, such as presenting skills and building discussions on top of each other. Moreover, it may also provide an environment to nurture the new beliefs and potentially shift students' identities as a learner who accept and even resonate with Western values and culture. The above discussion may answer the fourth research question – to what extent do the research participants feel it has been necessary to adjust how they approach their learning to suit the UK context and how does this adjustment relate to their identities and autonomy as learners? When students were "pushed" to think critically and find solutions rather than waiting to be "spoon-fed", they made the adjustment towards learner autonomy and to becoming an independent learner, as failing to do so may result in failing the assessment.

6.2.1.3 Problematic pedagogy

Tracy, along with many other participants expressed their preference or at least no resistance to the TLA in the new learning environment. More importantly, they could all provide rationales for the existence of the new requirements; however, this did not automatically mean they were all equipped with skills and knowledge to do as required. The transition experiences of some of the participants were problematic and some

even devastating. In the findings chapter, we could find the evidence repeatedly that the participants recognise the necessity of taking responsibility for their studies, some due to the requirement of the school or teachers and some always do so. However, as I discussed in the literature review that learner autonomy has various aspects and different levels, where teachers should ideally play different roles to facilitate the students' development especially for those who have just started this journey. This can cause issues in the student-centred teaching method that is widely believed in the Western education to facilitate learner autonomy if it is not tailored to the individual's ability, needs and current status.

Moreover, the autonomous learning environment is strongly shaped by Western academic rules. For example, while students were required to think critically, they were expected to write the essays and reports following a certain pattern and structure; they also had limited access to deciding the learning content, discussion topics or assessment methods. The UK learning environment, which has expectation on students being autonomous as a learner and as a social being in fact often limits learner autonomy. Rather, students need to learn *how to do* and *how to be* like Shotter (1993) argued, to act like particular kinds of autonomous beings during their master's studies.

In my data, the students with different backgrounds and abilities entering master's programmes were expected to dive in and cope, while the practical instruction and effective support for transitions were not always found. Teachers, according to the participants, seemingly provided abundant encouragement and compliments for almost all the decisions the students had made, but insufficient support and instruction that could specifically and practically direct the students what to do. This may not meet some of the Chinese students' expectations on teachers' roles. As discussed in the literature review 2.4.3 in terms of different expectations on the authority in different cultures, a

Chinese student may tend to believe it is “the responsibility of the person in the position of authority to look after the interests of the one or ones over which the person’s authority applies”(Scollon, R and Scollon, S. W., 1994, p.21 cited in Ho, 2001, p.106-7). In Chinese students’ perspectives, teachers are the authorities in both study and life, in which they are authorised to make more sensible decisions for the students and to correct or intervene their inappropriate decisions and behaviours. However, in the master’s study, teachers no longer nudge the students repeatedly, emphasising what they need to do and whether they are on the track, as their teachers used to do in China. It can be scary for a student who is used to living under the wings of their parents and teachers to be suddenly released to the “wilderness” on her/his own with new rules, new faces, language obstacles and culture differences. Therefore, some participants may have experienced the teachers’ absence in this transition process as unhelpful. This is when the peers stepped in and to a certain extent took the teachers’ role in the learning. I will extend the discussion of peer collaboration in the following section.

6.2.1.4 Peer collaboration

Some of the participants were relatively new to the concept of autonomy and as a result they seemed anxious about taking over the control of their learning and lives. For instance: they needed to make decisions on choosing the reading materials and the references from a massive database. In the meantime, they need to manage their daily time management on reading, revising, doing assignments, as well as grocery shopping, cooking and socialising with people from different cultures. For some of the Chinese students, allocating time to grocery shopping and cooking is challenging as all the Chinese universities provide three meals with a low price in the student dining halls. Fortunately, many students gathered together to keep each other company and some even stayed together for the whole transition journey as a coping technique, and this

was proved to be very helpful as explained in the finding chapters.

The research was not designed particularly to investigate the peer support in the transition, and therefore it is a surprising finding that this support had a dramatic effect on the transition process. The students' peers provided not only companionship, i.e. the comrades fighting the same battle, but also numerous opportunities to practise, such as polishing skills, generating idea sparks, and exchanging information and experience. Therefore, peers, soon found amazingly helpful, started to play a significant role in the students learning. They sometimes even replaced the teachers, for they were more prompt, responsive, understanding and more tailored to the needs. This research also luckily caught a transition peer group, reported on by Joyce, which was sustained throughout the whole master's study, and allowed insights into their collective transition process. Their collaboration and cohesiveness made the transition smooth and I could even say pleasant, however, as Joyce commented, "dodging bullets" by hiding in the group also deprived her of opportunities to practise and develop skills and the ability to face the upcoming reality when stepping into the wider society.

Peer collaboration was also highly encouraged by the teachers as group discussions were required in both the classroom (mainly in the social sciences) and some of the assignments.

> The group system aims to emancipate the student from the authority dependency relationship and to help him develop intellectual independence and maturity through interaction with peers, by glimpsing not only the context in which a more experienced scholar sees his problem, but the various contexts in which several equals see the problem. (Abercrombie and Terry, 1978, p.6)

The research data shows that some of the students, especially those who were shy and nervous in front of the teachers, tended to be more active in front of a small group of

peers and were more willing to express their opinions. Anderson (2005) also suggested that group discussions should be run democratically so that the practice of independent thinking and communication skills are encouraged and thereby students will develop their confidence and learner autonomy in academic life. Many of the teachers in this research, according to the participants, placed themselves in a more equal position with the students in order to encourage the group conversation. They were reported to often give away their power and avoid dominating the classroom compared to their Chinese counterparts. The methods proved to be helpful as teachers made way for the students to practise and become more comfortable and confident in their performance. For example, Dora, Jane and Minnie in the findings chapter mentioned they were given space to think and talk especially in the workshops, and felt their opinions mattered. Rachael took this process even further and developed a sense of citizenship, starting to realise her responsibility as a social being and the influence her voice could make to others.

However, as I discussed previously, both the concepts of being equal and autonomous are still within the control of the teachers and the assessment requirement. As teachers still marked the assignments, decided the learning contents and to what extent they would provide support and instructions, students naturally hoped to maintain a good relationship with the teachers and avoided any unpleasant conflict. What is worthy of attention is that the participants showed more respect to their teachers than fear, compared to their previous teacher-student relationship in China. In other words, students approached the teachers in the UK in a similar manner, respectful and careful, but more naturally and spontaneously and less likely due to concerns of consequences.

In terms of peer support and collaboration, not every participant experienced such a supportive community, especially in the science and engineering programmes, due to

the high competition for PhD scholarships. As only the top one of the class can guarantee the scholarship, some of the cohorts made the atmosphere so intense that they did not share or help each other. This phenomenon was mentioned by a few participants from science and engineering programmes however they all believed they were fortunately living in a sharing and supportive group.

Peer support, in the long-term development of a learner, is more common rather than teacher-student relationship, as we are all learners at school, at work and in life and the purpose of the university is to prepare us to face the independent learning for the rest of our lives. We will eventually find ourselves no longer having a supervisor that tends for our needs and the facilitation of learner autonomy is not aiming complete detachment, as I discussed in the literature. Rather, it is a status that we are confident and capable of controlling our learning with the support of the resources we could find. Chinese students' realisation of the value of peers and the enhancement of the ability to collaborate with others, not being dominating or submissive but placing oneself in a relatively equal position with peers requires balance with a lot of practice and appreciation, for the majority of this generation are the only child of the family.

6.2.1 Assessment

As I discussed in the findings chapter, a majority of the participants mentioned the assessment methods were different in the master's study, as the memory-based exams in their undergraduate study, which they had developed numerous techniques to approach, were mostly replaced by essays, reports, presentations and exams with problem-solving based questions. Moreover, plagiarism is taken very seriously in the UK, so referencing was strictly required, research had a scientific and moral standard, and copying answers was no longer available. Students' reactions to such a change is

contradictory: on one hand the participants largely expressed the new assessment methods encouraged them to understand what they had learned and apply into practice, while the serious academic standard was appreciated and happily complied with, so the students believed they would benefit from the learning and assessment in the future career; on the other, there were complaints from the participants that they struggled on preparation approaches, time management and self-control during the large amount of time to prepare for the assessments. Therefore, the change of assessment methods and thereby the adjustment the students had made in the master's study to a great extent affected their attitude towards learning.

In typical undergraduate study in China, knowledge (or rather what is assessed) is within a scope that is managed by the teachers and thereby delivered in bite-size sections in the contact hours, while in the master's study, many students realised the knowledge or what is assessed is less tightly defined and is expected to be managed to a greater extent by the students. Due to the previous assessment methods in the students' undergraduate study, the immediate utility of learning was to pass the exams and get the degree, students would reflect on how it might be assessed when they were studying rather than how to apply the knowledge into practice. In other words, students may pass the exams by cramming within a short time without fully understanding what they had written down on the exam paper. Therefore, students with less previous exposure to the new assessment methods may struggle, as to approach a problem-solving based assessment requires a greater amount of time to develop the understanding and techniques such as literature researching, fast and broad reading, manoeuvring focuses in the writing, and decision-making, etc. As a result, during the time of assessment preparation, students may also encounter the new challenge of self-control and how to allocate time and energy properly. For example, April from an engineering programme mentioned when she was in China,

two-week cramming before the exams was sufficient to get her all the passes and sometimes even an A. Unfortunately, she felt the same technique did not work in the UK. She struggled in time-allocation when three assignments were due on the same day, because each of them needed significantly longer time for revising and writing than before.

6.2.2.1 Students' various adjustments

The research data show that the participants made different adjustments and they had changed over time. If I were to summarise the adaptation process, and this may answer the fourth research question, the first adjustment made for the surprisingly heavy study load was mostly by extending the study time, as Chinese education gives great importance to diligence in learning (Jin and Cortazzi, 2011). Some participants blamed themselves for being "lazy" and having "low-efficiency" in the data and therefore, their intuitive coping technique is to work extra hard and sacrifice more of the sleeping and entertaining time. Such an adjustment was proved in the data to be useful to some of the participants but had also decreased their overall learning experience. Joyce, for example, though remaining at the top of her class throughout her master's studies, felt she used up all her time and energy in study, nothing else. When asked to draw a conclusion to her one-year life in the UK, she said she hoped she could have time to travel, party, join some student's societies and learn about different cultures from other international students. However, for those who were exhausted from all the hours they spent in learning but received few effects, it could crash them mentally and physically due to lack of sleep and loss of self-confidence. Tracy, who struggled significantly, felt herself to be a failure because not only did she fail in the assessments repeatedly, she also didn't enjoy her life living abroad.

Another adjustment that was more commonly seen in the data was a kind of balance or tactical return when students had reached the extreme and decided to rebalance their lives and study. A typical case is to arrange a daily and weekly routine to allow enough time to rest in order to increase the productivity. Some also chose to travel or develop a hobby so that study is not everything in their lives. The balance did not guarantee a higher academic achievement, for instance Jack in the case study, still struggled in his study after his adjustment but the balanced life and study had certainly enhanced his wellbeing and increased his productivity. Dora in findings chapter 4.3.1.2 changed her focus from a student who only put study as the priority and measure oneself only according to the study performance to being a more independent adult who chose her own life style and cherished a more colourful and balanced life. Such an adjustment violated the common expectation on a student based on the standard and requirement for being a good student in China. That is to say, students need to have an independent conception of their identity as a student to be able to break loose from the Chinese criteria and remould an image that is acceptable to themselves. It is worth noticing that students probed and explored various ways of adjustment, not under guidance but by keeping trying. Those who were not able to make quick adjustment may not have tried enough ways to find a suitable solution before the graduation. From the data, students who have managed to find a balance tend to have a more satisfactory learning experience in the UK.

Another participant Ryan's case was not specifically discussed in the findings chapter but may pose an interesting example for the potential benefit for such an adjustment. Ryan from engineering was striving to be the top one of the class to secure a place for the PhD Scholarship in the first semester. He sacrificed his sleeping and relaxing time, pushed himself to the limit and got seriously ill during the assessment preparation time due to over burning his body, but only found the top one place was far beyond his

reach, so he gave up. In the second semester, he was, instead, enjoying himself and enjoying what the foreign city and the world-class university could offer. He allocated time to work out, develop his hobbies and travelled whenever he could. The assessment results of the second semester surprised everyone including his teachers as his total grade was significantly higher than the second place of the class. He said in the interview that his brain was extraordinarily clear and fast during the exams and he somehow managed to conquer the most difficult calculation. He felt the relaxation time, plenty of sleep and a healthy and energetic body were all very essential to his performance in the assessments. Ryan's case may have challenged not only the Chinese educational value but the value in many other education systems worldwide which emphasise the time and effort devoted in learning but omit the need of a balanced life and self-development. Students' efforts may not always positively corelate with the performance. What may be more helpful is an autonomous and encouraging learning environment that helps the students know themselves and find their own balance from the individual ability and preference.

6.2.2.2 Language obstacles

For any international students who do not speak English as their first language, language can also be an issue no matter what English level the students have. Not only do they need to build new vocabulary for the higher level of the discipline and the academic context, students also need to get used to teachers' and their peers' regional accents. Even after they have conquered all these issues, understanding the contextual meaning behind the supervisors' feedback can haunt the students throughout their whole year of study. If you are also not a local British person, please join me for the quiz as follows: What does the teacher mean when she gives you feedback for a section of your essay saying: "That's very interesting. Would you consider including xx theories as

well?"? Does it mean the teacher likes your essay and is even impressed by your ideas? If so, do you still have to consider including more theories? What if you have three other essays to write and just hope to pass this one, should you worry if you don't get on with the theories she recommended? Moreover, the tone and the gentle way of making suggestions were also confusing for some of the participants, particularly for those who had experience of being told what to do and being punished when they did not meet teachers' (or their parents') criteria.

6.2.2.3 Potential explanation

I have explored a series of difficulties in Chinese students' transitions in terms of the learner autonomy required in the UK HE. However, many of the difficulties are not unique to Chinese cohorts. In Shan's and Daw's (forthcoming) current research project, they compare the first-year undergraduate students' transition experience in a Science programme at a Scottish university with the Chinese students enrolled in its transnational programme with duplicated curriculum and pedagogy at a Chinese university. They found that students from different parts of the world, both Chinese and Westerners, encountered difficulties in learner autonomy as part of the transition into their first-year undergraduate study, even for those who have been exposed to the Western education methods since primary school. Chinese students, at least at the beginning of contacting the new methods, did not show less confidence or more concern than their Western counterparts in the same programme. In other words, Western students may have experienced the same problem in learner autonomy but, fortunately, they had 3-4 years in their undergraduate study to make the adaptation. Therefore, Chinese students enrolled in the British masters' programme are not necessarily less autonomous than their western counterparts if we consider how long they have been exposed to the Western education methods respectively. However, the

teachers at the master's level may treat every student equally, expecting the students to perform as the master's level. Therefore, the transition can be challenging for those who need more than one year to become an autonomous learner with high self-control and capacity to manage the learning to the master's level.

6.3 Transition stage model

In order to understand the process of Chinese students' transitions towards learner autonomy in the UK master's study, as well as answering the first research question, I would like to develop on the findings and related literature by bringing forward a stage model as below. I need to remind my readers again that as the research data showed the individual transition experience to be highly varied, not every individual moved tidily through all the stages of the model. Moreover, each stage in the model may take place more than one time during students' transition, and more than one stage may happen at the same time rather than following a certain sequence. In addition, some of the students may not go through each stage or linger at one or more stages by the end of their master's study.

Stage 1: Realisation

Realisation usually happens early in the transition: soon after students enter the new learning environment, they start to spot any differences and realise that they are expected to be more responsible for their own learning. However, before students understand their responsibility, they may first notice the freedom and both the joy and anxiety it brings.

As I explained in the introduction chapter, students in China rarely have personal space as they share a dormitory with another 3 or more students. Furthermore, as I mentioned in the introduction chapter, Chinese universities commonly have many constraints and rules; failing to obey the rules will lead to punishment and humiliation in front of peers. However, many students choose to ignore many of these rules as long as they do not get caught. Nevertheless, we can imagine the students who used to live under many restrictions and had to be discreet in their behaviour to avoid punishment may go a bit wild once they have a taste of "freedom" when they first start their new university lives in the UK. Like one of the participants, Tanton, said: "There are no rules, apart from caution of fire and theft." Such freedom applies to their studies as well, as I discussed previously in this chapter as well as in the findings. Students are free to make decisions without teachers, parents or someone superior to look over their shoulders.

However, as freedom and responsibility are two sides of the same coin, when students acquire freedom, they are also expected to take the responsibility for their behaviours and decisions, therefore when they made a wrong minor choice, there was no following punishment. For example, I mentioned in the finding chapter 4.3.2.1, Joyce expressed her anxiety stemming from the absence of the teacher's monitoring and even punishment, for she started to realise her responsibility of self-control. Therefore, the new way of being may not necessarily be full of joy, instead, it might be a mixture of the excitement of newly-acquired freedom and the concern for the future uncertainty, as in the new figured world, many of the rules they were familiar with no longer exist.

In addition to the newly acquired freedom, the new pedagogy and assessment methods also require a series of different coping techniques, all the above mentioned, along with the different relationships with teachers and peers, may provide an environment to nurture the acceptance of the values and cultures that were available in the individual

participants' living and studying community. As discussed in the literature review chapter 2.4.2, the figured world is constantly shifted in accordance with the perception of the new environment and the gradual detachment of the affinity and the previous values, so are the identities. When the changes they perceived reached a certain threshold, it was time to make a decision – what to accept and what to refuse; what adjustment to make and to what extent the adjustment should be made, which took the students to stage 2.

Stage 2: Activate agency

In the literature review chapter, I mentioned learners need to take the agency (Toohey and Norton, 2003) to initiate their "conscious autonomy" (Little, 1991, p.20), as "agency is learner's will or drive to learn" (Yamaguchi, 2011, p. 270). In the findings chapter, we can clearly see the changes in learning and living environments released the students from close control in their life and their mind, for the great amount of free allocating time, long-term self-study, thinking in different dimensions and constructing new knowledge based on the individual's background knowledge. The level of autonomy varied as the students started to understand how it worked in the new learning environment, for example, how to cope with the essays and exams, and what kind of help they could receive from the teachers.

In this stage, some of the students, who had shown a traceable path, had a turning point in their learner autonomy development, in order to take control of their own learning in responding to the new requirements in the UK master's programme. I prefer to call the turning point "activate agency" (Toohey and Norton, 2003; Yamaguchi, 2011) during which learners take the agency to initiate their "conscious autonomy" (Little, 1991, p.20). If we look back to the literature review chapter, I particularly mentioned

learners' willingness and ability are two important components of learner autonomy according to Littlewood (1996). Therefore, the activation of agency also requires both learners' willingness and ability. Willingness in this context involves decision making, which may happen repeatedly in various aspects of taking control throughout the students' daily negotiation with themselves and the environment. Ability includes students' current capacity and can also develop over time through practices. Willingness and ability also contribute to each other, as willingness is the motivation to develop the ability while ability can determine whether the learner has the confidence and skills to be autonomous and even to unlock another level or dimension of autonomy.

Willingness

In the context of this research, where Chinese students gradually realise the differences in the new learning environment in terms of the learning requirements and the new culture, they not only needed to make a decision about whether they wanted to make self-adjustment, some of them also felt they had to. Some were determined to retain their former identities as good students and willing to devote all the efforts for this pursuit; some merely wanted to survive, i.e. to pass all assessments and get the degree, although such a pursuit may be a compromise due to personal limitations.

Students' willingness to activate their agency towards learner autonomy may be affected by complex factors. Taking a few key examples from the findings chapter: peer pressure, peers' support and companionship, as well as the teachers' guidance and absence. In this stage we need both "good" teachers and "bad" teachers. "Good" teachers keep students in the comfortable and safe zone to guide and nurture the students to be equipped with learning skills and self-control ability, while "bad"

teachers who are absent or provide insufficient support may trigger those students who are (nearly) ready to take the leap. However, we need to be aware that a fully supportive teacher is not spontaneously good as s/he may successfully prevent the students from experiencing the necessary pain, while a less responsive teacher is also not always bad when s/he is confident that the student is able or ready to make the decision on one's own.

Ability

Learners' ability to be autonomous can be depicted in levels or dimensions, which were discussed thoroughly in the literature review. Students' autonomous ability may develop with stage 3, when they are exploring the boundary of the new environment and the limitations of themselves. As students are from different backgrounds with different personal experiences, capacities and potentials, they need support and training suitable to their needs, so that they are able to examine and redefine their capacity of learning in the new environment.

Activation of agency may take place in different forms and could happen repeatedly in different levels as the negotiation with the environment goes on. In the first two semesters, students may have more contact (and potentially conflicts) with their course tutors and their peers, where, in most of the cases shown in the research, peers stepped in and replaced tutors when tutors were found absent or ineffectively helpful. However, in the third semester, when dissertation supervisors came in sight, the negotiation and adaptation became more individualised and diverse, depending on personal styles and relationships.

The three case studies explicated examples and insights for us to understand how it happens. Rachael's agency was activated at the moment she decided to embrace what was available in the new learning environment however mismatching it was to her expectation. Even though not much knowledge was taught according to Rachael, she practised her critical thinking ability in the open and encouraging learning community and gained the confidence to make her voice in the public. Jack activated his agency by acknowledging his limitation and later actively made adjustment by trying to balance both his life and study. He attempted to increase his productivity by making the best use of his study time and allowed himself enough time to rest. Flora's activation of agency happened frequently during her transition: when she started to trust and collaborate with peers; when she finally accepted herself, strength or weakness; when she found her comfortable and balanced life style, etc. Her continuous activations of agency and exploration of the new boundaries led her to a more independent self she wanted and equipped her with capacities to maintain a life that is not to the social standard and expectation as much as before, but to her will to a large extent. These activating moments signified the transformation of the students' identities as an autonomous learner, especially in the cases of Flora, Rachael and Dora, the personal development and study experiences were intertwined so that they also demonstrated the transformation to be an autonomous social being.

Like the development of identities, the activation of student agency also takes place in a sociocultural context; however, in some of the cases, it also requires a certain detachment. As I discussed in the literature review chapter, research shows many Chinese students tend to be motivated for a relatively more collective purpose – they tend to believe they are part of a collective group and represent their values and are obliged to devote themselves to the greater good of the community. During the interviews, many students mentioned they would strive to meet the family expectation

or make contribution to the country. Although not every student is studying for such purpose, for those who are, the activation of agency can be also part of the subjectification. Entering the stage 2 does not necessarily mean cutting off from their family, however, due to physical distance from family and old friends, and the more contact with and acceptance of the new culture, some of the students may activate their agency by embracing and cultivating the new independent self while disconnecting from their previous collective relationships.

In the findings chapter 4.3.1.2, Dora's personal transition provides a valuable example for a traceable activation of her agency. Her turning point happened when she was stuck in the conflicting views between her father and her dissertation supervisor in terms of her research project. Other issues were contributing factors, like her successful financial freedom from her part-time job. She made a decision to follow her heart instead of either her father or her supervisor. Another example is that Flora's self-acceptance took place at the expense of the attachment with her friends or rather social protocols and expectations, so she could know herself and pursue her life according to her will rather than the comparison with others.

Now if we pick up the discussion in the literature review first section, we could try to answer the question: will the students' identities shift from an interdependent self towards an independent self? See the figure below. In Dora's case, for example, she managed to shift away from the environmental factors that she used to be closely attached and therefore became a more independent being. However, as discussed in the literature, I wouldn't overgeneralise the transition process to each individual due to the decreasing gap between the Western and Eastern culture and individual differences. Some of the Western students in the process of transition towards learner autonomy may also need a certain detachment during the activation of their agency.

Chinese students, and students from Asian countries may achieve relatively more obvious detachment than the Western students.

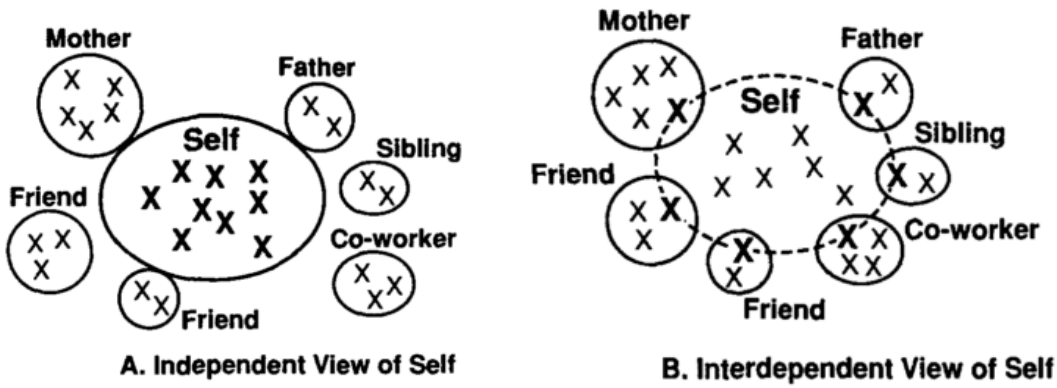

Figure 1. Conceptual representations of the self.

(A: Independent construal. B: Interdependent construal.)

(Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p.226)

We also need to bear in mind that stage 2 does not happen to everyone, especially those who did not believe there was an necessity to adjust themselves because the new learning environment was not so new to them. For those who experience this turning point, facing the decision to activate their agency, not everyone made such a commitment, when "such behaviour is not perceived as appropriate to his or her role" (Littlewood, 1996, p.428). Furthermore, those who made the decision to activate their agency towards learner autonomy may not be aware of such action and more importantly may not know exactly what to do. Rather, they may have stepped into an unknown zone and need the move to stage 3.

Stage 3: Exploring boundaries:

Once the students noticed the differences and took the agency to make adaptation, what was available in the new environment, both contributing and hindering factors composed a new figured world for students to live in: the new values and cultures, the new TLA methods, the new power relationship between teachers and students, the new roles the students needed to take, the different collaborative and competitive relationship with peers. Furthermore, the figured worlds shifted constantly while students continuously discovered a new culture, new rules and new experiences. Therefore, in this stage, the exploration of the boundary involves making adaptations to the new boundary through negotiation with others and the learning community. In addition, students need to explore the boundary of their capacity, that is, their learning skills and the capacity of taking control of the learning. During this process, students may develop their learner autonomy, and may even have a transformation of learner identities.

Teachers in this stage may play a more important role than they believe. They need to be aware that leaving space for the students to go through certain necessary pain is an important process and too much control may direct the students out of the puzzle efficiently, however, they may also miss the lessons they need to learn. On the other hand, as discussed previously, students have limited time in their master's study and may not be able to fully understand the new learning environment and how it works throughout their studies. In this case, they may need more support and even certain control and constraint as scaffolds to help them finish the study.

In addition to the appropriate control, teachers should also notice, for some of the Chinese international students, this stage may be particularly problematic due to the change of the interaction pattern between teachers and students. In the UK learning environment, students' behaviours and decisions are significantly more likely to be

encouraged, by the teachers, as well as the peers, compared to China, not to mention being punished. This change is proved in the data of this research to be helpful for students to develop their self-confidence and self-esteem, so that they became more determined, responsible and independent as a learner and as a social being. However, the change can also be challenging to some of the students who did not manage to make full adaptation, and therefore led to procrastination and confusion.

In order to help my readers understand these findings and the potential challenge it poses to some of the students, I would like to draw examples from my previous study experience to illustrate the students' learning environment in China. Even though the individual experience varies, these examples are shared with the majority of the participants. When students violated the school rules (for example, having a romantic relationship) or disobeyed teachers' requirements (for example, using a mobile phone in the classroom), they would receive punishment from the teachers such as yelling, putting individuals in the spot, reporting to parents, more homework, confiscating the student's belongings, etc. Some students were trained with long-term high pressure to believe a "good student" is the student who would take teachers' requirements as commands, acting accordingly because they knew they would be punished when making mistakes. Such interactions between teachers and students form a pattern of "command-action-error-punishment-correction" where teachers' interventions, i.e. command and punishment, play important parts – it ensures the continuity of students' actions and thus the repetition of this chain. If you would like to go back to Flora's story, you could see a very typical example of this behaviour pattern in the beginning of her stay in the UK, but in her case, she was also acting as a strict teacher/supervisor to herself, punishing herself severely when she made a mistake.

However, in the new environment, punishment is missing, and command is more of a

suggestion and can often be negotiated. The disruption, especially for the students who rely strongly on this pattern, may lead to numerous results. Some may proactively break the chain and escape the pattern, while some may accept the new reality of the breaking of the chain and strive to seek alternatives to mend the pattern aiming to keep the chain going, for example, replacing the role of teachers with peers. The above mentioned may all lead to the development of autonomy. For those who heavily relied on the command and punishment to scaffold their behaviours, the disruption may lead to more serious issues – it could cancel the action of correction and even cancel all the following actions.

For instance, Tracy's journey in the autonomous learning was painful but worthy of our reflection. How did a previous top student start to see herself as a "student scum" in the UK? Why was Tracy's procrastination triggered during her study in the UK and how did it develop into such a severe situation? If her teachers had intervened, could things have been better? Another example was discussed in the assessment section in this chapter, where teachers' gentle tone in the new learning environment may also cause a certain confusion. Rachael, in the case study, complained that when the teacher/supervisor used a gentle tone and negotiable attitude, she tended to feel demotivated as she worked more productively under demands rather than suggestion. In other words, some of the students respond better to the tone they are more familiar with, which unfortunately is the severe requirement and even the consequences if they have failed to obey.

To fully immerse oneself into the new education value (if it's new to the student), both acceptance and agreement need to take place. The acceptance of the new rules, the acceptance of the chain break, and the acceptance of themselves. Flora's case study provides an explicit example of how a student broke the chain and constraint,

embraced herself and achieved personal development by becoming an independent person, and thereby it influenced her identity as an autonomous leaner. In her case study, we could see a traceable process of how she stopped punishing herself, instead, used the encouraging methods taken from the environment, and gave herself appreciation and understanding.

However, the research data also showed the breaking of the chain and the students' successful adaptation in the UK environment may be problematic when they re-contacted the home country and culture. Rachael was undervalued and excluded at the work place in the Chinese society when she returned home after the master's study. If this may become the consequence of the acceptance and agreement of the Western culture and detachment of the affinity in China, should we still encourage the Chinese students to go through the transition and make adaptation? Or should we teach them the way which they are already familiar with and are more prevalently accepted in China so that they could easily use them in the future practices? There is no single answer to this question, as every educator is also different with distinct beliefs and educational values based on their experiences and positions in the institution. At some point, they will need to make the decision: whether they should deliver what they believe is right or what the students need when the two happen to be conflicting positions.

Chapter 7 Conclusion and Implications

The study aims to enhance the mutual understanding of teachers in UK HE and Chinese master's students, and to reduce mismatched expectations between them. Both the literature review chapter and the discussion chapter provide explanations of the different educational beliefs in the two countries, based on different cultures, values and power distances, and how these have contributed to different teaching, learning and assessment practices. The research used narrative inquiry, following 19 Chinese master's students for a whole academic year from 2016 to 2017 and has found that Chinese students with different backgrounds and previous learning experiences have vastly different transition experiences and have distinct responses to the learning environment. The findings have challenged the previous literatures which tend to associate Chinese international students as a group with certain stereotypes, e.g. being passive in learning and silent in classroom activities. Furthermore, the study discusses new relationships students build in the UK HE learning environment, both among peers and between teachers and students. The findings demonstrate that interactions with teachers and collaborations with peers can reshape students' learner identities and influence the development of their learner autonomy. Therefore, both the teachers and peers played significant roles for the students during their transitions. However, there are a few limitations to the study that are explored below before moving on to consider the implications.

7.1 Limitations

First of all, the study was carried out at a world-class university which means the enrolled students were usually the top of their classes at their previous universities so

that they may have more resources both educationally and socially. Therefore, some of the findings of this study may not apply to mid to lower-ranked universities in the UK or other Western countries, as this study is highly contextual, based on students' family background, previous learning experience, individual motivation and learning skills as well as the school requirements in their masters' studies. Furthermore, both the pilot study and the main study implied that the transition experiences captured may be partly about undergraduate to postgraduate transitions as well as from Chinese universities to a Scottish university. Thus, the transition experiences, especially the struggles, may not be entirely unique to Chinese students; some of the features may be shared by Western students initially exposed to the autonomous learning environment in any level of their studies.

Other limitations should also be considered, for example: qualitative research makes it hard to know the extent of and whether the issues are common across different disciplines, as the sample is small. In addition, other methods such as observation of the classroom activities and group studies might bring different results in terms of teaching, learning and assessment practices. Interviews are always reconstructions of the past developed between the researcher and the participants; direct observation can sometimes provide a more accurate window on teaching practices.

7.2 Implications

There are a number of implications for teachers, policy makers and students, which are generated based on this study and my personal experience as a Chinese international student and a researcher of the student experience. I would like to organise a few workshops at my university and other universities I work with in the future to disseminate the research findings and implications. However, my experience is far from

enough to provide complete guidance on the teaching and learning practices, so I am merely making suggestions and I would be very pleased if they could encourage reflections and discussions among readers and my future audiences.

Implication 1: Facilitate learner autonomy

This study may help educators in UK HE or even universities in other Western countries to develop further understanding of Chinese international students especially new entrants. The study shows that students who strongly rely on teachers' instructions and responses to guide their behaviours may struggle the most when teachers set different boundaries than they experienced with their previous teachers in China. Some Western educators emphasise respect for students' independent decision making and leaving them space to probe and stretch. They also believe students need to experience the consequences of their decisions as part of the learning process, (the necessary pain as mentioned in sections 4.3 and 6.3 of this thesis). However, many Chinese students may be inexperienced in managing their own learning and expect a spoon-fed educational experience or are used to passively following what is decided and take what they are told as the main learning approaches. Educational development departments should provide information and training for Western teachers and help them understand students' expectations and the reasons behind these in terms of the resistance to learner autonomy.

Nevertheless, this does not mean teachers should strive to meet the students' expectations and keep them in their comfort zones (see 6.3 for more discussions). Teachers should make efforts to ease the transition by offering more guidance and being more responsive at the beginning and inform the students that their guidance will be progressively withdrawn while students are expected to take over the control of

their own learning.

At the beginning of the study, teachers could be more explicit about their expectations of students being autonomous in their learning and give more attention to students' expectations. When teachers say: "I expect you to be autonomous." or "You need to be active and take control of your learning.", students may not fully understand what it really means for them and how to act accordingly, even when they are willing to. Students with less experience or not yet equipped with the knowledge and skills to be autonomous may be confused as they do not understand why the teachers would not tell them what to do / what it means. Therefore, learner autonomy could be perceived by the students as "I'm on my own." and teachers as "unhelpful". Despite that teachers do not want students to rely on them, it is important the students still trust them and would feel able to reach out when help is urgently needed. Moreover, educational development should provide support and training for the students, such as time-management, how to make study plans, and tips to conquer procrastination and so on, tailored to their autonomous capacity.

The dissertation stage can be particularly challenging for education students as they suddenly have a lot of time to allocate for researching, reading and writing mostly on their own, whilst science and engineering students tend to have a more regular schedule working in a lab. Students inexperienced at studying without a mandatory timetable may procrastinate and lose control over time. There are a few approaches to prevent or diminish these difficulties. Supervisors can try to be stricter about the stage deadlines and set boundaries early, for example, acknowledging to the students that if they miss the deadline for handing in a chapter, the supervisor will not be able to make extra time to give feedback. This is so that students realise there will be consequences if they do not follow the plans and they will also be more responsible when the plan is for

both teachers and students to follow and arrange their time. In addition, although time-management and self-discipline are part of the learning process, teachers should be alert for times when a student goes silent for a long period. They may be silently struggling, being stuck on one concept, a chapter or data analysis, or have already lost control. Students at this stage may not always ask for help. They may be ashamed or do not know whether the teachers are able to help them.

Implication 2: Communication between teachers and students

This study presents personal stories with participants' thoughts, feelings, internal struggles and coping techniques in different stages as well as when facing various difficulties. I hope this will help teachers working with Chinese students to relate to and develop better communication with students based on a much deeper understanding of their experiences.

Teachers should be aware of the possibility that their requirements and expectations are more highly significant for students' UK learning experiences than they may realise. Therefore, Western teachers, even whilst trying to play a role as a facilitator in students' learning, may have significant direct effects on the students' personal and academic development.

The teacher-student relationship may become more interactive and dynamic during the dissertation stage when each student is assigned with a supervisor who, inevitably will have their personal preferences and values in relation to the student's dissertation project. Supervisors should be aware to give feedback affirmatively and be strict sometimes in order to set a rule for students to follow, especially for those students who are used to parent-like relationship with their teachers. They should also leave

space for students to practise decision-making as it is sometimes more difficult for students to make decisions with their supervisors' suggestions.

Although Implication 1 may suggest Chinese students as a group share certain attributes, they can be very different, as shown in this thesis. The teachers in the UK and other Western countries should be aware that Chinese international students, although they appear to be a cohort from the same cultural background with similar tendencies in terms of their learning methods and communication preferences, may have vastly different responses and personal developmental trajectories once entering the UK learning environment. Furthermore, not every student in this study reported that the pedagogical and assessment methods were noticeably different from their studies in China and some of them did not feel it was necessary to make much of an adjustment, if any. This may mean that the gap between the Chinese and Western education systems may have reduced in recent years, especially with a large number of Chinese students studying aboard and returning home to become educators in the educational institutions in China. Therefore, teachers and policy makers need to be aware of where the students come from and keep updated on the students' previous learning experience and contents, in order to design pedagogy accordingly.

Students who are enrolled or intend to study in the UK should understand developing the capacity of self-discipline and time-management in the UK master's study may be as important as learning itself. They need to understand they are expected to be autonomous learners when reaching this level even though they might be firstly exposed to such an environment. In addition, being expected to be independent also entrusts them with voice and decision making, therefore, they should have a voice when having a discussion, a conflict or a confusion, and stand behind their decisions as these are all part of the learning for a master's student.

Implication 3: Heavy study load and severe competition within the one-year master's study.

The findings of this study also reveal the heavy study load and the severe peer competitiveness some students experience, particularly in science and engineering programmes. One of the case studies depicts a sad story of a student that was crushed by the pressure and unfortunately lost interest in the subject, and more importantly his self-confidence. His case might be the toughest but other students also found their studies hard and there was too much to process in both learning contents and learning methods within such a short amount of time. In fact, there was an obvious hierarchy among the students, particularly in science and engineering that depended on the ranking of the university in which they did their undergraduate degree, because their foundation knowledge gained during prior study showed significant differences. Students from the top universities in China made relatively less or no extra effort especially at the beginning of their masters' studies as they were already familiar with much of the material being covered on their courses, whist students from a lower-ranked university or those who chose to study a different subject than that covered by their undergraduate programme tended to struggle more.

Universities in the UK could attempt to solve this problem by only enrolling students from the highest ranked universities in China, but such a policy may elevate the unequal distribution of the educational resources and violate the value of education which gives equal opportunities to people from different classes and backgrounds. However, teachers and policy makers could still make efforts to improve the situation. Teachers could encourage group work which may help relieve individual students' study load although it may cause animosity amongst members of the group when one or more

members were perceived as not making the same effort as everyone else. They could make Chinese students aware of the support system and include the students into collaborative projects. Policy makers should also consider whether it is necessary to extend certain programmes of study from one to two years.

Implication 4: Balancing learning and life

For students, learning should not take up the entire experience in the one-year living in the UK. It is important to ensure a good work-life balance in order to ensure mental and physical wellbeing. Students should have a reasonable timetable to allow a daily period of work and leisure, as taking time away from the books to give the mind some rest often helps generate new lines of thought. Many participants mentioned that they enjoyed hobbies, clubs and leisure activities such as experiencing British culture and travelling to other cities, both in the UK and in Europe. This can help them enjoy their learning experience more. Many participants shared these coping strategies, and these were repeatedly mentioned and proved to be especially helpful for balancing the life of someone undertaking a long-term assignment like writing a dissertation.

Students who chose to study abroad should also allow themselves to fully immerse themselves in the foreign culture with an open mind. Making friends, learning about different values and lifestyles were also mentioned in the data to be key to releasing homesickness and assessment pressure. Many participants, when making conclusions about their masters' studies, believed what they had learned the most was not in the classroom, but the different ways of thinking and living, and the ability to leave their comfort zones.

Implication 5: Future research

There are a few implications for future research due to the limited scope of the research. As the study only targeted Chinese students who may amplify the difficulties all students may experience during the transition, future research should try to compare students from different cultural backgrounds, disciplines and English language levels. Chinese students' transition experiences may not be unique; they may share a lot of similarities with Western students when they are first exposed to autonomous learning environments. In addition, the transitions in the data may partly be about undergraduate to postgraduate study rather than cross-cultural. Furthermore, it is important to disentangle various factors such as gender, age, family backgrounds and work experience, as these facets are just as important as the previous learning experience, which was the main focus of this thesis.

Future research could also narrow down the sample group to certain rankings of universities in China and investigate whether there is a pattern for the similarities and differences between UK and China in terms of TLA. If so, students in the UK can be targeted according to their previous learning experiences and provided with different levels of support.

Transition-out has been brought to focus in recent years to explore students' re-entry to their home country after their study abroad, as well as their employability. This may provide insights for students who have an intention to study abroad and help them make their decision.

7.3 Conclusion

The study might be a snapshot of a group of Chinese students' experiences in 2016-17. However, I hope this thesis will provide substantial resources for educators and policy makers to reflect on and that it will be fruitful in inspiring researchers for their future studies.

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Appendix: Interview questions

1st interview (July to November 2016)

1. What was your undergraduate major when you were studying in China?
2. What was your most recent assessment before you came to Edinburgh? What did that involve?
3. Can you tell me about how you approached that assessment? Why did you approach it that way?
4. Did you have a strong opinion about your topic? Did you make your own argument?
5. What did you need to do to be successful in that kind of assessment?
6. What do you think your first assessment might be here at Edinburgh?
7. How do you think you will approach that?
8. Do you have an idea what it would take to be successful on this first assessment?
9. If you are stuck with your first assessment how would you get help?
10. Have you noticed any difference in terms of teaching methods or teaching and learning activities between China and here? How do you feel about it?
11. Have you noticed any difference in terms of school requirement or expectation on students compared to your previous learning experience? How do you feel about it?
12. What is your main purpose to study here?
13. What roles do you think the teachers should play in your current study?
14. What do you value the most in learning? (What are the most important things of learning?)

    Please choose up to eight cards, rank them and explain.

    Tutors/teachers, peers, practice, creativity, plenty of space/time, preparation, sense of achievement, grades, feedback, clear instruction, interest, comfortable zone, reading, encouragement, confidence, talent, self-control, motivation, target, stick to plans, strong will, patience, chance to make decisions, degree, promising career, family, not losing face, making my voice, communication, critical thinking

2nd interview (April-May 2017)

1. Have your reasons for studying remained the same or changed? What are they now if they have changed? How have they changed and why?
2. Have you noticed any differences in your learning experience so far (e.g. assessment methods and requirement, teaching and learning activities, school requirement and expectation)? How do you feel about it?
3. Can you tell me about the most recent assessment you have completed? How did you approach that and why? What do you think it takes to be successful in such assignments? Have any of your ideas about assignments changed?
4. Could you give me an example of a challenge you met during your study? Have you conquered it yet? What did you do?
5. Have you received any kind of support from your tutors, lecturers, peers or any other people or resources? What do you think about the support?
6. What do you think is the biggest achievement since you came to study in UK apart from the rise of English level?
7. Do you have any idea about your dissertation? Do you know what's going to happen? Have you made any plan?
8. What do you feel disappointed during the study? What do you feel happy during the study?
9. Think about the staff you contact more frequently, what's your impression about them?
10. What do you value the most in learning? (What are the most important things of learning?) Please choose up to eight cards, rank them and explain.
    Tutors/teachers, peers, practice, creativity, plenty of space/time, preparation, sense of achievement, grades, feedback, clear instruction, interest, comfortable zone, reading, encouragement, confidence, talent, self-control, motivation, target, stick to plans, strong will, patience, chance to make decisions, degree, promising career, family, not losing face, making my voice, communication, critical thinking
11. What do you think makes a good learner? Could you describe yourself as a learner?

3rd interview (in August/September 2017, after the submission of dissertation)

1. How did you approach your dissertation? Is there any part you feel particularly satisfied with?
2. Was there any challenge you encountered? What did you do?
3. Was your supervisor helpful? What's your impression about him/her?
4. Did you have any experience of giving or receiving support from your peers? How did you feel?
5. How do you describe your learning experience during this whole year?
6. What do you wish you could do differently if you had another chance?
7. Has your study purpose remained the same or changed? What are they now if they have changed?
8. What do you think is the biggest achievement during this year? What do you think contribute the most to the progress you made?
9. What do you value the most in learning? (What are the most important things of learning?) Please choose up to eight cards, rank them and explain.
   Tutors/teachers, peers, practice, creativity, plenty of space/time, preparation, sense of achievement, grades, feedback, clear instruction, interest, comfortable zone, reading, encouragement, confidence, talent, self-control, motivation, target, stick to plans, strong will, patience, chance to make decisions, degree, promising career, family, not losing face, making my voice, communication, critical thinking
10. How would you describe yourself as a learner?